

The background of the entire image is a vibrant, painterly landscape. A woman with long, wavy brown hair, seen from behind, stands in a field of yellow wildflowers. She wears a bright yellow, long-sleeved, floor-length dress with a full skirt and a light-colored fedora-style hat adorned with yellow flowers. A yellow ribbon is tied around her waist and flows down. In the distance, a rustic wooden cabin with two chimneys sits on a grassy slope. Beyond the cabin, a winding path leads towards a range of majestic, snow-capped mountains under a bright blue sky with soft white clouds. The overall scene is idyllic and romantic, with a soft, golden light filtering through the air.

OREGON EVER AFTER

ROSE

AN OREGON TRAIL
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

MORGAN
& DAWSON

ROSE

AN OREGON TRAIL FAIRYTALE RETELLING



MORGAN DAWSON

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THANK YOU!

Thank you for purchasing Rose, the first book in my new Oregon Ever After series! I hope you enjoy the story!

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DEDICATION

For my readers

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CHAPTER 1



ROSE

“Uncle, Uncle...please,” she gasped, struggling to fight through her tears as he shoved her into the carriage.

“Stop your crying, you ungrateful wretch,” he snarled, pushing her out of the way so he could climb in after her.

Desperately reaching toward the closing door, she cried out in pain as he slammed it shut on her fingers.

“Sit down and be quiet.”

Biting down on her lip to try to keep the sobs from escaping, she curled up on the cushioned seat and avoided looking up at her uncle. Her fingers throbbed in time to the frantic rhythm of her heart, and she knew they’d be bruised by tomorrow.

She hated him. She’d never hated anyone in her entire life, but she *hated* him.

It had been five years since she’d last sat in this carriage, and if she could go back in time and warn her fifteen-year-old self to run, she would.

The carriage lurched forward, and she lifted her head to look at where a few of the servants she’d made friends with while living here stood and watched her go. They looked distraught, their hands covering their mouths and some just stared after her in shock.

But what could they do? If they tried to say anything, they'd lose their jobs.

Rose understood that no one could help her. She was trapped and the only one who could make this stop was her uncle.

"Please, I don't understand what I did wrong. I...you can't do this to me."

"I can and I will." He crossed his leg, before absently checking his pocket watch. "I've provided free housing and care for you for five years, much longer than any person would. I never asked to be burdened with a peasant relative, but my dear sister, oh foolish Lucy, she chose to marry a peddler. You're an embarrassment to the Abbot name."

"But...but Uncle, you can't sell me. You don't own me."

He let out a hoarse cackle, a cruel smile settling over his wrinkled face. "I've owned you since the day I was forced to become your legal guardian. I only ever did it out of a sense of duty for my sister, but enough is enough. I feel bad for the poor man who decides to buy you, but that's not my problem."

It was clear arguing with him would get her nowhere and as she swallowed the growing lump in her throat, she tried to come up with a plan. There had to be a way out of this.

When she had her first chance, she'd run, and never stop running. She knew if she accepted her fate and stayed with the man who would buy her, she'd be treated terribly. He might force her to marry him.

The kind of men who purchased women were not good men.

Shutting her eyes tight, she thought back to her younger self. A girl living in a small cottage with her father in a little village. Living through the small collection of books left to her by her mother. That girl had always dreamt of what the future would hold. She'd believed that anything was possible.

Foolish.

Happily ever afters were just for fairy tales. A prince wasn't going to come and rescue her. She was on her own and she'd do whatever she could to save herself.



The cool metal of the shackles around her wrists stung every time she attempted to move her hands as the large man her uncle had passed her off to, tugged her toward the wooden stage in the city centre.

It was her turn. A few other men and women had been before her and she'd watched in horror as the crowd greedily bid on them, as if they weren't even human.

Digging her heels into the dusty ground as the man dragged her toward the steps, she screamed as loud as she could. Perhaps if everyone here thought she was a crazy, hysterical woman, no one would want her, and they'd have no choice but to let her go.

The chains yanked at her wrists, and she let out a cry as she stumbled up the stairs and collapsed on the wooden stage.

"A young girl, aged twenty. Great at household work." She recognized her uncle's voice now and she lifted her head to find him standing at the far end of the stage.

Managing to get to her feet, she quickly kicked at the man as hard as she could, and he let out a curse. It was enough for him to loosen his grip on her chains and without a second thought, she ran back toward the edge of the stage.

She got a few steps before realizing another man was coming up the steps toward her. She turned and was about to leap down off the stage when she was jarred backward.

Her original captor had hold of her chains again and was pulling her toward him. She screamed and cried, but it was no use. She'd been free for

a short time, but she wouldn't have made it far. She was surrounded.

Warm tears stuck to her cheeks as she felt the man's large hand tighten around her arm painfully.

"Try that again and you'll regret it." His hot breath hissed in her ear, and she shuddered.

Her legs shook and felt like they would soon give out on her, but she willed herself to remain standing. She would not give these horrible people any more power over her.

The crowd began their bidding, but she didn't have the energy to pay attention to them. All she could focus on was the sick, churning feeling in her stomach and before she knew it, she was being dragged off the stage. She looked over her shoulder long enough to see the back of a tall man standing in front of her uncle, shaking hands with him.

Was that who'd bought her?

There wasn't long to dwell on it, though, because her vision darkened, and an intense dizziness swept over her. She felt her knees give out, and the man let out a shout as she tumbled to the ground into the peaceful darkness that engulfed her.

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CHAPTER 2



DUNCAN

The girl was trembling, loose strands of brown hair stuck to her tear-stained face. The sight made him want to punch someone.

“Here you are, sir,” the man holding her said, offering the chains to him. He scowled. “Take the shackles off.”

“But, sir, she’s a troublemaker. It’d be better to keep them on until she’s had a chance to calm down.”

Duncan turned to face the man completely, knowing the mere sight of him would be enough to end this nonsense. Sure enough, the man’s eyes widened as he stared at him.

He was used to the stares. The look of fear and disgust that danced across the faces of everyone who caught sight of him.

“I said, take them off.”

This time, the man didn’t argue and fumbled through his ring of keys until he shakily undid them, and they fell to the ground with a clatter.

He’d expected the girl to take off as soon as she was free, but instead she just stared up at him, her red-rimmed, green eyes wide.

“Worse than you were expecting?”

Her chin trembled as she took a few steps back. The man gave him a knowing look before walking away, clearly deciding it wasn’t his problem anymore.

“You can run if you like. Or you can come with me.”

“I can...I can go?”

“The city isn’t a kind place. I’d advise against it, but you’re not my captive. Do what you like.” He shrugged, turning away from her as he hoisted the rope he’d purchased back up over his shoulder.

He didn’t look back to see if she was following. Didn’t care really. He’d done what he could to help her. If she chose to stay and beg on the streets, that wasn’t his problem.

“Sir? Sir? Wait.”

He glanced down at her as she rushed up beside him but didn’t stop. He had a lot he still needed to do before he left for Oregon Country.

“Where would you take me?”

“I’m going to Oregon.” He cleared his throat. “You can come if you like.”

“Oregon?”

Heaving a sigh, he quickened his pace. Perhaps this had been a mistake. What was he going to do with a frightened girl on the trail anyway? She’d only get in the way of what already was going to be a long and difficult journey.

“I won’t marry you,” she said firmly.

“Well thank goodness for that, I don’t want a wife.”

The girl stopped and he felt himself pause and look over his shoulder. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and he could see her gaze frantically searching him. For what? He didn’t know, but something deep within his heart hurt for her.

“Miss, I won’t do you harm. You can join me and my party on the way to Oregon and perhaps build a life for yourself out there. Far from this place. But I won’t make you come. You must decide quickly, though, because I have to get back.”

She bit at her bottom lip, and he felt the burn of her gaze land on the left side of his face. Turning away, he tipped his hat down slightly to cover it, even though he knew it never could be completely hidden.

He made it a few paces away before he heard the scuffle of her feet behind him as she hurried to catch up, her arms now crossed protectively over her stomach.

He hated to think what she'd been through leading up to now, but he couldn't dwell on it at the moment. He'd endured his fair share of abuse. Life was cruel and there was no way around it.

Out of the bustle of the city, he caught sight of the messy outline of wagons and people. A large group had already gathered in preparation for the journey and Duncan had been camping with them for a week now.

He didn't know any of their names as he mostly stuck to his own group, but that was fine by him. He wasn't taking this trip to make friends.

Locating his large wagon, he tossed the rope to Clarence who caught it in his slender arms and gave him a wide grin. "This is perfect, sir."

"Oh my! Who's this?" Mrs. Potter gasped, dropping the pot she'd been scrubbing back into the basin as she rushed over to the girl.

Duncan cast a glance over his shoulder and noticed the surprise on her face as she stammered a few words before looking to him for help.

He sighed, sitting down on a large log. "I don't know. Found her in the square."

"What do you mean you *found* her?" Mrs. Potter scowled, placing an arm around the girl and guiding her to sit in front of the fire.

"She was for sale. I bought her."

"You *bought* her?" Horace looked up for the first time from where he was counting their supplies for the hundredth time.

He shrugged, not having the energy to explain.

Mrs. Potter shot him a venomous look before crouching down next to her. She spoke gently and he couldn't make out what she was saying.

Turning his right ear toward them, she heard the girl's shaky reply.

"Rose. Rose Ripley."

"Oh, dearie, you're safe now. Don't you worry another minute. I'm Mrs. Potter. Would you like some water? You look exhausted."

As the older woman fussed over her, Duncan grew bored and reached into the wagon for his rifle. "I'm going hunting," he announced to no one in particular, and without waiting for a reply, he stalked away from the chatter and laughter of camp.

He passed a group of young girls playing near a tree and when they caught sight of him, they shrieked and ran away. One smaller child tripped over her dress and fell into the dirt.

Duncan didn't bother to stop, knowing he'd only frighten her more. He was a monster. A hideous monster and the sooner he came to accept that, the better. Perhaps the girl would've been better off with whoever else would've bought her.

It was too late, though. He'd made the mistake and now it appeared that he had another mouth to feed until they made it to Oregon.

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CHAPTER 3



ROSE

She hadn't seen the strange man who'd purchased her since their arrival at camp and she was grateful for it. She'd been surprised to find the people he was traveling with to seem so kind, especially Mrs. Potter.

She sat around the crackling fire now, gazing up at the seemingly endless expanse of stars.

Mr. Flair strummed a quiet song on his banjo and from nearby she could hear the chatter from other camps.

She'd heard about the large groups of people setting off for Oregon Country of course, but she'd never dreamed she'd be part of them. She'd learned it was a dangerous, two-thousand-mile journey, and the thought of being so far away from the only place she'd ever called home was frightening.

The man, who she'd been told was Mr. Clemonte, since he'd never bothered to introduce himself, had said she could stay if she wanted to. She now found herself bouncing back and forth between both options.

To stay meant spending months with these strangers, one whose gaze made her want a hole to open up in the ground beneath her and swallow her whole. And who knew what kind of life there'd be for her if she made it to Oregon? She'd be entirely alone.

Still, to head back into the city meant trying to find work and possibly being seen by her uncle. Would he still think she belonged to him and try to sell her again? She could end up in an even worse situation. At least with Mr. Clemonte, she didn't think he had intentions of harming her even if his demeanor suggested otherwise.

A constant ache pounded the sides of her skull as she thought about all her options, and it was almost dizzying.

"Miss Ripley, dearie, are you alright?"

Pulling herself from her thoughts, she forced a weak smile as she found Mrs. Potter's warm gaze. "Yes, yes, I'm alright, thank you. Just been a long day."

"I can imagine. You must be exhausted, poor girl. I've got a bed set up for you in the wagon if you'd like to head to sleep."

"Thank you...I...I just wanted to ask something."

Mrs. Potter placed a weathered hand over her own. "Of course, what is it?"

"How do you all know Mr. Clemonte?"

"Well, we've all worked for the Clemonte family for many years. We chose to travel with him when he decided he wanted to go to Oregon."

"Oh, I see."

The kind woman frowned, shaking her head. "The poor lad, he's had a rough life. He needs us to look out for him. He acts like he's alright but the burdens in his mind weigh on him."

"What...what happened to him?" Rose thought of the purple and red mottled scar that covered one side of his face and rippled down his neck. When she'd first looked at him, she'd been startled by it.

Mrs. Potter let out a long breath, her sad, brown eyes meeting hers. "I think that's a story for him to tell you himself, dearie. Now run along to bed. You're going to need to be rested up for the journey. We have one last

busy day of preparations tomorrow and we'll need to run to town to get you some things."

Rose nodded, disappointed that Mrs. Potter wouldn't tell her, but she understood. If someone knew her own story, she wouldn't want them to share it with strangers around a campfire.

She couldn't imagine Mr. Clemonte telling her anything, based on how few words had passed between them. But perhaps by the end of the trip, she'd come to understand a little about the man who'd bought her.

Mr. Flair opened the back of the wagon for her and offered his hand to help her up.

She thanked him and found two neat beds made in between the enormous stacks of supplies.

Not bothering to pull the blanket back, she curled up on top of it and hugged her knees to her chest.

As sleep began to take its hold, she didn't bother to fight the tears that escaped and the tremors that shook her entire body. She was so tired. In a way she'd never been tired before.



The next morning, she struggled to keep up with Mrs. Potter, who was surprisingly fast, as they wove through the busy crowds.

Mr. Clemonte had given them money to get what they needed, and she hated having to rely on him. It only meant she owed him more.

She found herself searching the passing faces for her uncle or that horrible man who'd been in charge of her yesterday, not sure what she'd do if she saw them.

Mrs. Potter didn't seem bothered about it, though, as she rattled on and on about the clothes they'd need to get for her.

Since the dress she'd been wearing had been torn yesterday, she needed a change of clothes so it could be mended and washed. Everyone else had been given a chance to pack their things, while all of her little belongings remained at her uncle's house. Likely being thrown out at this very minute.

As she thought of her mother's books she'd left behind, she wanted to cry. There was nothing to be done, though.

"Come along, dearie. We must hurry so we can get back to camp and get everything done." Mrs. Potter tutted, gently grabbing her arm and guiding her into a little shop that was overflowing with fabric and mannequins.

"Hello there, how do you do?" The man at the counter smiled, looking up from his book.

"Very well, thank you. We were hoping to find a nice dress for her today."

Rose felt the man's gaze flicker over to her and she quickly looked down at her feet.

"We can measure and make a fine dress for her, with your choice of fabric. It would be done within a few days."

"We don't have time, I'm afraid. We're leaving for Oregon tomorrow morning. Do you have any dresses that are already made?"

"Yes, but nothing fancy. I think there's a dress in the back that would be almost a perfect fit."

"Excellent, could we see it?"

The man nodded and went into a doorway next to his desk. They waited in silence for a while before Mrs. Potter cleared her throat. "If this dress isn't what you want, we'll go to a different store."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine. I don't need anything fancy, really," Rose insisted, wanting to spend as little of Mr. Clemonte's money as possible.

"Master Clemonte said to get you a nice dress, so a nice dress is what you'll get."

The shopkeeper returned holding a simple yellow dress with long puffed sleeves. “Here it is. I reckon it’ll fit you, Miss. You could try it on in the dressing room if you'd like.”

Rose nodded, reaching to take it from him. The fabric was soft, and it looked like it was well made. After she'd quickly tried it on, the decision was easy. When she came back out, she said, “I love it. It’s perfect, thank you. We’ll take it.”

By the time they made their way back to camp, Rose found herself with an armful of clothes. Mrs. Potter had also insisted on a nightgown despite her insisting she could just sleep in the dress. She also had a new pair of beautiful, brown leather boots.

She couldn’t recall ever having such nice shoes before and she was afraid Mr. Clemonte would be mad at Mrs. Potter for buying so much. He’d only said to get her a new dress.

When they arrived in camp, Mr. Clemonte sat alone on the back of the wagon. He looked up at them as they approached, his one eyebrow furrowed.

“Here you are, Master. A fine dress for Miss Ripley. I also got her some sturdier, sensible dresses, and some boots since those old flats of hers would never have made it to Oregon.”

Rose wanted to hide behind the older woman as Mr. Clemonte’s piercing blue eyes met hers. “Very well.”

“Where did Clarence and Horace disappear to?”

“Water the oxen,” Mr. Clemonte replied gruffly, tipping his large hat down enough to hide his face.

For a brief moment, Rose felt pity for the man stirring in her heart. Whatever had happened to him, he was clearly embarrassed by it.

“Well, don’t just stand there. I’m hungry.” He grumbled.

“Yes, Master.” Mrs. Potter hurried to tend to the fire and as Rose stared at him, all her feelings of pity disappeared.

She didn't care how rough his life might have been. It didn't give him any right to treat others like that.

Moving to stand in front of him, she frowned. "I need to put these in the wagon."

He lifted his head enough for the bright scar to seem to stare her down for a few dreadful moments before he sighed and got down from his seat.

She watched after him as he stalked away, heading away from camp. She didn't know where he was going but she didn't care. At least she could help Mrs. Potter with lunch without his icy gaze following her.

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CHAPTER 4



DUNCAN

They'd left the camp early that morning and it had been a peaceful journey so far. He walked ahead of his wagon while Horace and Clarence drove the oxen.

He could hear the lilted chatter of Mrs. Potter and Miss Ripley, who walked behind the wagon, and the laughter between the two men.

He preferred to walk by himself where he could be alone with his thoughts. It was a warm, late April day, with birds chirping and the sun shining. After spending a long winter in Missouri waiting to head out with the wagon train, it was nice to feel the warmth of the sun again.

As he walked, he thought of his decision to head to Oregon. Ever since he'd first made the choice, he knew it was right. There was nothing left for him in Virginia. His childhood home had burned to the ground and after his father's death, he'd found out he had a limited time until the townhouse would be sold by the lawyer.

Unless of course by some miracle, he'd found someone who would marry him and truly love him.

It had been a cruel act by his father. An impossible task, and his father had known it when he'd written it into his will.

Duncan clenched his fists together at his sides. Yes. It had been selfish. What kind of father would leave their son with nothing?

He was twenty-five in September and then the time would be up. The townhouse would sell, and all of his inheritance would be donated to an orphanage.

So, after his recovery, he'd decided to pack up what he could and take all the money from the safe which would be plenty for him to start over in Oregon.

He hadn't expected the three servants to come along with him, but he was grateful they had. He'd quickly come to realize just how much he didn't know.

"Mr. Clemonte?" A voice startled him from his thoughts. Turning his gaze to land on the girl he hadn't heard walking beside him, he frowned.

"What?"

"Mrs. Potter asked me to see if you wanted any water?"

"If I wanted water, I would get it myself," he snapped, tired of people always assuming he needed to be looked after.

Miss Ripley raised an eyebrow, resting a hand on her hip. "I didn't say you *couldn't* get it yourself. I simply asked if you wanted any, since Mrs. Potter had taken the canteen out."

"And all *I'm* saying is I don't. Want. Any." He annunciated each word, glaring down at her, daring her to look away from his mangled face.

Her gaze didn't falter, though, and her pale green eyes seemed to stare deep into his. Quickly looking down, he cleared his throat and hoped she'd go away.

"Well then, next time, perhaps you could say a simple 'no thank you.'"

With that, Miss Ripley stalked away, and he was left to himself once again.

Biting at the inside of his cheek, he let out a long, slow breath.

He hadn't expected the girl to be so outspoken. If he'd known, he'd never have bought her, but at the time she'd seemed so frail and helpless.

She was going to make the months long journey a nightmare. It unnerved him that she'd stared up at him so defiantly like that. Most people flinched away when he tried to meet their gaze.

But Miss Ripley...the fire in her eyes had been enough to frighten him. It was like she could see into his soul, the place he wanted no other person to go.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he focused on each step on the deeply rutted road and the wagon traveling ahead of them.

He couldn't let her win. This was his wagon and if she couldn't learn to hold her tongue, she could find another group to travel with.

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CHAPTER 5



ROSE

Kneeling by the basin of dishes, she began to scrub at a plate while humming a quiet song. Mrs. Potter was making up the beds in the wagon and the men had gone to take the oxen for water.

It had been a long day. Her feet and ankles throbbed with pain, and her back ached.

She didn't think she'd ever walked so far in one day in her entire life. She'd met the captain of the wagon train that morning when he'd stopped at each wagon to make sure everyone had all their supplies and was ready to go.

He'd mostly been speaking to Mr. Clemonte, but she'd heard him say they needed to go about fifteen miles every day.

At the time, fifteen miles hadn't seemed so far. Now her body said otherwise.

Mrs. Potter bustled over now and knelt down next to her with a dry towel in hand. "I'll be glad for my head to hit the pillow tonight."

"Me too." She smiled, passing the dripping plate to her.

As they washed the dishes, Rose found herself looking at her new surroundings in awe. They were next to a large river, and the orange of the sunset glistened on the water and looked almost magical.

The wind was cool and stung her cheeks and she couldn't wait to get back to the fire.

Once they'd finished and packed all the dishes back into the wagon safely, she sat down on the hard ground and held her hands out toward the crackling flame. The ends of her fingers were red, and she let out a sigh of relief as she felt the warmth against them. A dark purple bruise adorned two of them, thanks to her uncle.

"Here, child, wrap this around yourself."

Mrs. Potter eased herself down on a log next to her and held a thin, green blanket out to her.

"Oh, I'm alright, thanks. The fire's warming me up now."

"That might be, but I don't need you catching your death out here. Come now."

Rose nodded, knowing she was right. She took the scratchy blanket from her and draped it over her shoulders, pulling it tight around her. "Thank you."

They sat quietly for a while, until the roaring laughter of Mr. Flair announced the men's return. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at the two men, realizing that Mr. Clemonte hadn't returned with them.

"Where'd you leave the master?" Mrs. Potter asked, holding a cup of coffee out to Mr. Watson.

"He said he was going to stay by the river for a while. He's in a bad mood today." Mr. Flair shrugged.

"I believe it's because of something the young missus said to him." Mr. Watson frowned, taking a long sip of his coffee.

Rose let out a laugh, shaking her head. "Well, if he's gravely upset over me telling him the *truth* then it's not my fault. If he would only try to show some sort of manners, then I wouldn't need to tell him off."

The three servants all looked sadly at her, and she found herself feeling so much pity for them. She'd only been around Mr. Clemonte for a short

time, and she could already feel the hold on her temper fading. How had they put up with him this long?

“Why did you even want to come with him when he doesn’t treat you well?”

Mrs. Potter sighed, looking down at her hands folded neatly in her lap. “He *does* treat us well, dearie. We’ve known him since he was a sweet, little, toddling boy. He has a kind soul, deep within, I assure you. It’s just been hidden beneath all his pain and sorrow.”

“Indeed, Miss, his bad mood this evening is no doubt because he feels guilty for how he acted toward you to make you speak against him. He knows what you said is the truth, but it’s hard for him to accept,” Mr. Flair added, his gaze focused on the fire which cast a faint orange glow in his eyes.

Rose thought about this for a few moments. These people had known Mr. Clemonte the longest, so she knew she could trust their words. And after all, hadn’t the man bought her and rescued her from a worse fate? He’d even given her the option to go free.

“If that’s the truth,” she finally said, “then I feel sorry for him. I do. However, that’s no excuse for him to treat others so terribly all the time.”

By the time she climbed into bed that night, she didn’t have long to dwell on the words of her new friends. Much needed rest took hold and not even the dreams that usually plagued her could reach her.

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CHAPTER 6



DUNCAN

He has a kind soul, deep within, I assure you. It's just been hidden beneath all his pain and sorrow.

Mrs. Potter's words from the night before rung in his ears on repeat. He'd been making his way back to camp when he'd heard their hushed words. They'd been talking about him and hadn't realized he'd heard.

He thought of Miss Ripley's words as well. How she'd said she felt sorry for him, but there was no excuse for his behavior.

He knew she was right, even if anger stirred in his blood when he considered it. The parts of himself that had been protecting him for so long tried to tell him that after all he'd suffered, he was allowed to be this way.

Perhaps today, though, the kind soul that Mrs. Potter believed he still had was trying to push its way upward. He had three good and loyal servants who'd chosen to take on this difficult journey with him. One that they knew the risks of, yet hadn't even thought twice about coming. Although he did pay them well, it was still a risk they were taking.

And how had he thanked them for their sacrifice?

As for Miss Ripley, he didn't know much about her past, but he knew her life couldn't have been easy for her to end up on a podium being auctioned off to a bunch of hungry men. Yet, she was still kind to those around her.

He scratched the raised, bumpy skin on his left cheek just as he heard someone clear their throat beside him. Startled, he quickly turned to look down. Miss Ripley. Of course.

She was clearly unwilling to let him spend the day undisturbed. He wished she'd choose to approach on the side he could actually hear out of, and he found his face drawing into a scowl.

Her piercing gaze stared up at him and she raised one eyebrow as if daring him to shout at her.

How badly he wanted to, but he forced himself to exhale slowly and consider his words. After all, there was no way for her to know he was deaf in one ear.

"Good...good morning, Miss Ripley."

"Good morning."

"How can I help you?" He turned his head to allow his good ear to be close enough to hear more than muffled words.

She folded her hands in front of her as they walked, the clatter of the wagons and braying of the oxen almost deafening. "Oh, I didn't need anything, thank you. I just...wanted to apologize for yesterday. I shouldn't have said those things when I don't really know you. I'm truly grateful that you rescued me from that horrible auction. It only troubles me to see how you treat others sometimes."

Duncan nodded, focusing his gaze on the dirt beneath his feet. "No, you don't need to apologize. All that you said was right. I am cruel and awful. I try not to be, but...I don't know. I'm the one who should apologize, so I'm sorry. My temper gets the best of me sometimes."

Somehow, he found the courage to look back at her, and found her looking up at him with a warm smile on her rosy cheeks. "As does mine. I understand."

They walked in silence for a while, and he tried to come up with something...anything to say.

“It’s beautiful out here. I’ve always loved the countryside, away from the bustle of the city,” she said softly as he struggled to piece her words together.

“I...yes, it is. Luckily for you, there won’t be any city life out here.” He paused, feeling the heat burning his cheeks as he thought of how to say what he knew he needed to. “Uhh...Miss Ripley? You should probably know I can’t hear out of my left ear, so I...it’s easier if people approach me on my good side. Then I can hear what you’re saying better.”

Her big, green eyes met his and he could see the pity in them. He quickly looked away.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that. You should’ve said something sooner.”

He frowned as she slowed her pace and crossed over to walk on the other side of him. “It’s not something I exactly like to share with people.”

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

He forced a nod even though he wasn’t so sure about that.

“If...if I might ask...what happened?”

That sudden, sinking feeling pooled in his stomach and he felt his heart quicken in his chest. He knew the question would come eventually. They all asked, some sooner than others. At least she wasn’t like some people who pretended to ignore it altogether even though it was impossible that they didn’t notice.

Most people upon meeting him, instantly showed shock and disgust on their expressions, even if they tried to hide it. One older woman he’d met while in a store a few years ago hadn’t tried to be polite about her curiosity. He could still clearly see her wide, brown eyes as she covered her mouth with her hands.

Oh, my goodness, what happened to your face?

Shame burned deep within him, and he forced himself to swallow the lump in his throat.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked,” Miss Ripley said quickly.

“No, no, it’s alright. I’m just surprised you didn’t hear it from Mrs. Potter.”

“She said it was your story to tell.”

Despite himself, he let out a short laugh. “It’s not one I exactly like to tell, so I’d prefer if she told it. She’s a great storyteller, you know. When I was young, she used to tell me the most incredible tales.”

He knew he was rambling, hoping she’d forget about her question, but the thought of telling her pained him. When people knew what had happened, they always felt bad. He could see their pity and the consolation in their eyes. He didn’t like it. It always felt like he was no longer a person, but a walking tragedy.

“I think the hardest stories for us to tell, are the ones we must find the strength to.”

He looked down at her and let out a long breath. He knew she was right. Even if he didn’t want her to be.

She tucked a long strand of her dark brown waves behind her ear as her gaze met his. As he looked into her eyes, he felt as though he could trust her. She hadn’t run from him yet and perhaps it would be nice to have a friend after all these years of solitude.

“Alright,” he said, scratching at the back of his neck as they continued along the uneven road. Looking back into his memories, he located that awful day five years ago that he’d tried to lock away forever, and he cleared his throat, ready to begin.

CHAPTER 7



ROSE

“I was in a fire. I was nineteen at the time. I was living at my father’s estate and...the house was covered with flames in seconds. It happened at night, so we were all asleep. The smoke was suffocating when I woke up and I couldn’t see a thing. I tried calling for my family, but it was so loud with the crackling and hissing of the fire and beams falling from the roof.” Mr. Clemonte paused, shaking his head as he looked down at the ground.

She felt her own heart racing, sick to know where this story would undoubtedly lead.

“I tried to get to my sister’s room but got disoriented by the smoke and I found myself at the stairs at the opposite end of the hall. I turned around but by then the flames had cut me off from going back the way I’d come. Anyway, I was about to go down the stairs but realized the bottom of them were engulfed too. I found a window and broke it open, but by then the fire was on me, and I experienced the worst pain of my entire life.”

Rose bit at her bottom lip as she watched his pained face. It was like he was back in his burning home experiencing everything all over again. “That must have been frightening.”

“It was. I jumped out the window and fell to the ground. All I heard was my father shouting and then he was on top of me, trying to get the flames out. I passed out and the next thing I knew I was in the hospital. I was told

my mother and sister —” His voice caught in his throat, and without thinking she found her hand move to gently rest on his arm.

His gaze met hers, and the tears shone in his eyes. “They didn’t make it out. I spent months in the hospital recovering and the doctor kept saying I was lucky to be alive. I didn’t feel lucky at all. My father bought a house in town that I moved to for the rest of my recovery. The only reason he survived that night was because he had fallen asleep in his study while reading and hadn’t made it upstairs.”

“The fire started upstairs?”

He nodded. “We think someone left a candle burning and it tipped over. We lost a few servants too in the fire, but most made it out.”

Rose frowned, unable to imagine what it must have been like for Mr. Clemonte. She didn’t think she could imagine surviving something like that.

“And so, I was left with an ugly scar on the left side of my head that took my ear and scarred down my shoulder and arm, to have a constant reminder of that horrible night.”

“I’m...I’m so sorry, Mr. Clemonte. It must have been awful.” Her voice shook and she forced herself to clear her throat. “Scars to me, whether on the inside or out are a reminder that we survived. They’re not something to be ashamed of.”

His bright blue eyes met hers and he nodded once, before looking over his shoulder back to the wagon. “Thank you. I’m going to go and help drive the oxen for a bit to give them a break.”

She dropped her hand from his arm and watched after him as he quickly turned back. Letting out an unsteady breath, she stopped and waited for their wagon to pass and tried to catch Mr. Clemonte’s eye again. He was focused on the oxen, and she wondered if she’d pushed too much. Perhaps she shouldn’t have pried, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She wanted to know more about this group of people she’d ended up traveling with on a journey that a week ago, she hadn’t even imagined

going on. She hated that telling her had brought so much pain to the surface again, but she was glad to know a bit more about his past.

It was easier to understand why someone acted the way they did, when you had a glimpse of how the world had treated them before. It had been cruel to him, and she could imagine the way people's stares must make him feel.

She'd only been with him for a few days and had already seen many people who talked to him, struggle to look at him, and if they did, quickly look away.

She realized he was someone who didn't want to be seen. He wanted to be left to his pain, but the scar brought attention to him and questions that he didn't want.

As she fell into step with Mrs. Potter who was whistling a cheery tune, she frowned. She wished she hadn't asked him about it. She was no better than the rest.

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CHAPTER 8



DUNCAN

Days had passed in a blur and exhaustion threatened each part of his body. He'd never walked this far in his life. The ground was bumpy and covered with deep ruts from previous travelers who'd already braved the journey, which made walking difficult at times.

A new day had begun. One that was filled with much uncertainty. They'd arrived at the Kansas River crossing late the night before and had spent the night camped there.

Horace had shared some horrible stories he'd been told by other travelers who'd heard of the many accidents that could happen when making river crossings.

The captain had checked the river that morning and had let them know it was at a safe level to cross. Still, Duncan knew things could still go wrong, even if it was considered safe.

"Are you folks all ready?"

Duncan looked over his shoulder and found the captain. "As ready as we'll ever be."

"You're near the front of camp, so you'll be one of the first groups going across. You'll be at the back behind the McLains and the Riders. Me and some of my scouts will ride along on the horses to keep the oxen on track. I'm just going to check they're all ready and then we'll go."

“Alright, thank you, Mr. Cohen.”

The older man gave him a half-smile before quickly heading over to the McLain wagon.

“I don’t know about this.” Mrs. Potter’s voice wavered as she came around the other side of the wagon.

“We’ll be alright. Mr. Cohen has done this many times.”

She huffed, resting a hand on her hip. “And *many* times, someone has been killed. I don’t trust the water. It could tip us over in seconds.”

“Mrs. Potter, I know it’s frightening, but you must stay calm.” Miss Ripley came to stand beside the woman now, and Duncan watched as she gently placed a hand on Mrs. Potter’s shoulder. Just like she’d done a few days ago to him when he’d shared his story.

He pushed the thought away, annoyed with himself for even thinking about it again. It had lingered in his mind ever since and it was foolish.

“The oxen are strong and had a good night’s rest. Just pray and trust that the Lord will deliver us safely to the other side.”

Mrs. Potter nodded, tears in her slanted, brown eyes as she quickly turned away and went to check the wagon yet again.

“Thank you,” he said, his gaze settling on Miss Ripley.

“What for?”

“Comforting her. I know it’s been a great help to have another woman with her out here.”

She smiled softly, a dimple appearing on her left cheek. “Of course. She’s been so kind to me ever since I arrived. She’s a dear.”

When Mr. Cohen guided everyone into position and the three wagons were all secured together, it was time to do one last, final check.

The captain inspected each team of oxen and retied any loose knots.

Duncan moved to the back of the wagon and offered Mrs. Potter his hand as she clambered up and sat down with an audible sigh. Then he glanced to Miss Ripley who stood a few paces away, staring out at the river.

She was biting her bottom lip and her eyebrows were knitted tightly together.

“Miss?” he called, motioning for her to come and get in the wagon.

When she stood in front of him, he frowned. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, thank you. Just a little nervous. The river suddenly looks bigger than it did before.”

“We’ll be alright. Just make sure to hang on.” He forced what he hoped was a reassuring smile, because even though he told her it would be fine, he wasn’t so sure.

Her slender hand slipped into his and he helped her safely into the wagon, hesitating for a second before letting go of her hand.

He waited until she was safely seated before he went to join Clarence who was speaking to Mr. McLain.

“My brother already made the journey to Oregon. He once wrote about an entire family who had their wagon tip over and all of them drowned.”

Duncan felt his heart quicken in his chest. He didn’t know why people insisted on telling horrible stories right before they were about to go. He felt like it only made everyone more afraid and more likely to make a mistake.

Mr. McLain looked up at him now, his eyes instantly landing on his face before quickly looking away.

At this point, he was used to it. He didn’t have time to be upset by it at the moment. He was more concerned about getting across safely, so they could continue on.

The McLain wagon was carefully led down the bank, and Duncan held his breath as it dropped down into the water with a splash. There was no going back now.

He walked alongside his team of oxen with Clarence and Horace, urging them onward as the Rider’s wagon was the next into the water.

Mr. Cohen was atop his horse, riding alongside the middle wagon. A few scouts rode ahead of the wagons as well. Duncan glanced over his

shoulder at the three horses following behind them.

He recognized one as the captain's son.

Letting out a long breath, he tried to reassure himself that there were so many men keeping an eye out for any danger and would help them guide the oxen if the animals started to panic.

Duncan waded out into the river now, instantly feeling the chill of the water against his legs. It was a dreary, gray morning and the cold river was no help. The current sloshed against the sides of his wagon and he expected it to sink at any moment.

Clarence shouted a few times to get the oxen moving again as they'd come to a halt. They brayed and panted; their eyes wide as they struggled to pull.

He could feel the muddy river bottom under his own feet and imagined how difficult it must be for them if even he was struggling to keep his footing.

It seemed like they'd never reach the other side. Every time he looked to the bank, it seemed even farther away.

Eventually though, the McLain wagon managed to trudge up the bank, soon followed by the Rider's. Then it was their turn to get out of the river.

Mr. Cohen had abandoned his horse on the shore and came to help as the oxen climbed onto the bank. The wagon jolted to a stop, though, and he heard Mrs. Potter shriek.

Quickly looking back to make sure she hadn't fallen out, he noticed one of the men riding behind him give him a solid nod.

Relieved, he moved to help Mr. Cohen who was shovelling the front wheel which had gotten caught in the mud.

"The banks always have the softest spots," he huffed, sweat beading on his brow.

Duncan almost laughed as he noticed the oxen looking back at them as if in disgust. They were eager to get back up onto the safety of the grass.

The other wagons had stopped too, and a few men waded back into the water to help dig out the wagon.

Finally, Clarence shouted for the oxen to pull, and the wagon creaked in protest before jolting forward and up onto the safety of the bank.

The sound of men and women cheering and celebrating calmed his racing heart. They'd made it.

There were waters ahead they would still have to brave, but it felt like such a relief to have done this first one with little complications. When the wagons were safely pulled up on to the grassy bank, they began to untie the ropes that had secured them together.

Duncan watched as Mr. Cohen and the other men on horseback went back across the river, ready to bring the next set of wagons across.

He knew it would be a long, exhausting day for them and he felt selfish for thinking about setting up camp and having a day to rest.

Rounding to the back of the wagon, he unlatched the door and was met with Mrs. Potter's hysterical face. "We almost sunk, we did. From now on, I'd rather swim. Me and the girl would have been trapped."

"It's alright, Mrs. Potter. We were right on the bank, so it wouldn't have sunk far."

"Easy for *you* to say." She refused his hand and climbed down with a huff before tottering away, still muttering to herself.

He found his gaze land on Miss Ripley who wore an amused smile. "Ignore her."

"Oh, I intend to." Taking her arm, he helped her safely to the ground.

She turned to look up at him and furrowed her eyebrows. "That water must have been freezing. You men need to get changed and I'll hang everything to dry."

"I'm alright. It wasn't too bad," he tried to say, even though he could feel the chill of the damp clothes clinging to his skin.

“Don’t argue. We don’t want any of you catching pneumonia.” She crossed her arms as Clarence came to stand next to him.

“Thank you, Miss.” The man pulled a hand back through his unruly, blond hair which left it standing straight up.

“What exactly did you do?” Duncan let out a laugh, shaking his head. “You look like you went for a swim.”

Clarence scowled. “Well, we did.”

“Yes, but you look like you held your head under the water. You’re absolutely soaked.”

“I’ll have you know, I nearly drowned. So, hold your laughter, sir.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow as Clarence hopped into the wagon and began digging for his clothes.

“You really shouldn’t laugh at a man who almost drowned,” Miss Ripley said softly, a small smile lighting up her face.

“Well, I suppose not, but you must admit, he looked like a wet dog.”

She laughed lightly before turning away. He watched after her as she went to comfort Mrs. Potter who was sitting on the ground beneath a tree.

There was something about the girl that made his heart warm at the mere sight of her. He knew it was foolish and he shouldn’t let himself entertain such thoughts. A man like him had no chance, so he couldn’t dare risk ruining the easy friendship that had started to form between them.

Ever since he’d shared his story, most days she came to walk with him for a while. He’d learned about her parents and the small cottage they’d lived in. How her father had been a peddler. He’d also come to learn how she’d ended up with her horrible uncle.

If it weren’t for the fact that miles separated him from Independence, he’d have his hands around that man’s throat in seconds.

CHAPTER 9



ROSE

She hauled a large bucket of water she'd gotten from the river up to where Clarence had a fire going. Since they had time to stay in one place today, they wanted to get as much done as they could.

Their fresh water supply was limited, and Rose knew that as the summer's sun began to beat down on them in a few weeks, thirst would become something she'd soon know well.

Mrs. Potter filled the copper kettle and hung it over the fire to boil. A few more wagons had made it across the river now and people milled about everywhere.

Two young girls were chasing after each other nearby, and Rose gave them a warm smile.

A piercing shriek startled her, and she quickly jumped to her feet. People were shouting now and as she hurried over to the bank where a few others had already gathered to see what was going on, she felt fear pooling in her stomach.

A few of the scouts had abandoned their horses and jumped in, swimming toward whatever had gone wrong. She could see the front wagon's team panting and braying wildly and the wagon itself was lopsided.

"What happened?" A voice gasped beside her.

She turned to find Mr. Clemonte staring out at the river, his eyes wide. “I’m not sure. I just heard a scream and the men jumped in the water.”

The crowd muttered and a few children began to cry as they realized someone had fallen out of the wagon. A blonde head was dragged into sight by a group of men and one of them scooped her into his arms and quickly waded through the water.

People waiting on the bank rushed over to help him, and Rose craned her neck to see if she could recognize the woman.

“She’s dead! Oh, Mama, is she dead?” A child’s voice wailed.

“Mother! Mother!” Someone else shouted now, and she glanced back out at the water where she could hear the agonized voice coming from. The wagon was still at an awful angle and the men who remained in the water struggled to calm the oxen.

“I think I’m going to faint. Oh Heavens!” An older woman beside her gasped, and Rose quickly reached out an arm to steady her.

Helping her to sit down safely on the ground, she took in the woman’s pale face and red eyes. “It’ll be alright, ma’am. They’re tending to her now.”

She didn’t know if her words were the truth since she couldn’t see the woman through all that now crowded around her, shouting for cloths and bandages, but she could tell this woman was about to be the next one needing help.

“Sir. Sir! I’m sorry. She’s gone. Sir! That’s not going to help! Don’t waste anymore supplies.” A man’s voice could be heard shouting above all the noise.

Rose thought she might be the next one to faint. How easily that could have been her. She didn’t understand what had happened. The water was fairly shallow since the men had all walked across it.

How had she drowned?

Tears burned the back of her throat and threatened to spill over her cheeks as she tried to ignore the cries of the girl still in the wagon, calling for her mother.

Focusing on the woman beside her, she placed an arm around her shoulder and tried to keep her tears at bay as she felt the woman's shaking sobs.

This was the first death on the trail. It had only been a week and they'd already lost someone. They still had many months of travel to go. How many more would they lose along the way?



She struggled to sleep that night. Every time she shut her eyes, she could see the events of the day play out as if she were experiencing it all over again.

The day had been mournful, and camp had been empty of laughter.

She spent most of the day comforting Mrs. Potter who was so shook up that she'd trembled nervously for hours before she'd finally fallen asleep.

The men had helped dig the grave, while the captain and his team went back to guiding the rest of the wagon's across as if nothing had occurred. She knew it had to be this way. They couldn't afford to spend too long in grief because they had to keep moving.

She was grateful she'd been part of one of the first groups to go across because she didn't know if she could've braved it after witnessing what had happened.

The woman who she learned was Mrs. Thomas, hadn't drowned after all. She'd fallen into the river when their wagon jarred and hadn't been able to get her footing before being swept under the middle wagon's oxen and suffered a horrible kick to the head.

When her body had been lowered into the grave, a young girl around her own age cried hysterically and had to be helped back to camp by a few older women. That had been the girl crying for her mother while she'd lain dead on the bank.

Rose couldn't imagine the pain that girl and her entire family must be dealing with now. To know you still had so far to go while in the process of grieving a loved one, must be horrible.

She let out a sigh, throwing her blanket off. The wagon bed felt too stuffy tonight and she struggled to breathe. She needed fresh air.

Quietly crawling past Mrs. Potter who snored peacefully, she reached to unlatch the door and carefully stepped down to the ground.

Camp was eerily quiet at this time of night other than the chirruping of the crickets all around.

It was bright enough to see with the large moon shining down on her and she took in a deep breath of the cool night air.

Creeping quietly away from the wagon where the men were asleep under it, she wrapped her arms around her chest and ignored the shiver that ran through her body.

At the edge of camp, she found a small tree and eased herself down on the damp grass in front of it.

Gazing up at the twinkling stars, she wondered why that poor woman had been allowed to die. It seemed cruel and unfair.

Most of the people out on this trail were simply on the search for a fresh start or a better life. What had been her story?

Tears pricked her eyes and this time she didn't force them away. She was alone now and knew that if she wanted to keep going tomorrow, leaving the woman and her grave behind, she needed to let herself grieve. It felt strange to grieve for someone she didn't know, but there was something about being out in this strange, empty land that made her feel like everyone was family.

A warm tear trickled across the bridge of her nose as she hugged her knees to her chin. Quiet sobs shook her body for a long while and when she eventually recovered, her lungs ached.

Her fingers were numb now as she wiped at her eyes.

“Miss Ripley?”

She gasped, quickly turning toward the voice. She could make out the figure of Mr. Clemonte walking toward her, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, it’s alright.” She sniffed, rubbing at her nose with the back of her hand, hoping he wouldn’t see she’d been crying. “I just wasn’t expecting anyone else to be up.”

“Well, I heard you leave the wagon and you’d been gone for a while. Thought I better make sure a wolf hadn’t gotten his paws on you.”

She managed to force a small laugh as he slowly moved to sit down beside her.

They sat in silence for some time and every now and then she looked at him and saw him staring up at the stars as well.

“It’s cold out here. Mrs. Potter would have my skin if she knew I was letting you catch your death.”

“I’m alright. I needed fresh air tonight.”

He nodded, pulling one arm out of the sleeve of his jacket. “Even so, I don’t want to face Mrs. Potter’s scolding. She might seem sweet, but she knows how to yell.”

Rose smiled as she felt the weight of his heavy, cotton jacket drape over her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

She pulled the jacket tight around her, grateful for its warmth. It smelled of smoky bonfire and dirt, and it was somehow comforting.

“Are you alright?” He spoke softly, as if afraid his voice would scare her away.

She knew he wasn’t asking about the cold now. “Yes...or I will be. Today was hard.”

“Yes, it was. I knew I’d see death on the trail, but I hadn’t imagined just how cruel it would be.”

“That...it could’ve been me. Or Mrs. Potter. Or...or you or...” she trailed off, burying her face in her knees.

“But it wasn’t. We’re all safe.”

Silence settled around them again, but it was a comfortable type of silence. She didn’t have the words she needed to speak about all that was weighing on her heart, and she knew he likely felt the same.

It was nice to just have his steady presence beside her on this cold night on the wide-open prairie.

When they eventually made their way back to camp, she found herself looking up at him, trying to read what he might be thinking, but his expression gave nothing away.

“Mr. Clemonte?” she asked.

“Please, I’d prefer if you called me Duncan. Mr. Clemonte was my father.”

“Alright. Thank you, Duncan,” she said hesitantly and smiled slightly. “Why did you decide to go to Oregon?”

He let out a long breath, his moonlit eyes meeting hers. “A fresh start. Away from all the people who knew the horrible things that happened to me and my family. What about you? Why did *you* decide to come with us?”

She raised an eyebrow, surprised by the question. Why *had* she? They’d been perfect strangers to her, and Duncan had frightened her at first. “I...I suppose I had nowhere else to go. And I think maybe I was afraid to be alone.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to come with us, Miss Ripley.”

She felt a smile tug at her lips as they neared the wagon. “You may call me Rose if you like.”

“Alright,” he whispered, offering her his hand as he unlatched the back of the wagon. She took it, feeling the chill of his own fingers against hers as she climbed up. “Good night, Rose.”

She turned to look back down at him, and whispered back, “Good night, Duncan.”

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CHAPTER 10



DUNCAN

They'd left camp early that morning, leaving the poor woman's grave behind. As he'd been helping to pack up, he noticed the family all standing beside it saying their goodbyes.

Today he walked alongside the oxen, listening to Clarence and Horace argue. The two of them fought like brothers sometimes. He didn't care too much about getting involved as his thoughts kept wandering back to last night with Rose.

She'd been beautiful with the moonlight shining down on her, even with her teary, red eyes and nose. He had known she'd been crying, even if she'd tried to hide it and it pained him to see her so upset.

He looked over his shoulder now, finding her walking beside Mrs. Potter a bright smile on her face as she spoke. Whatever she'd been feeling last night, she had managed to disguise it well today.

A loud crack startled him, and he swung his head toward the noise. The wagon ahead of them began to slow, calling for their oxen to halt, and Clarence quickly did the same with their own team.

Duncan craned his neck to try to see what had caused the delay.

Soon enough, Mr. Cohen trotted toward him on his speckled mare and tipped his large-brimmed hat at them. "The Bretton's had a wheel snap.

They have the supplies to fix it, so you're going to follow the wagon ahead of you around them and we'll carry on."

"So, we're leaving them behind?" Mrs. Potter stomped up beside him, resting both hands on her hips.

"They'll catch up soon enough, ma'am. The trail is easy enough to follow here with all the ruts, so they'll meet us where we stop for the night."

"If I ever..." Mrs. Potter turned away, muttering to herself under her breath.

"Thank you, Mr. Cohen." Duncan nodded, hoping he hadn't heard Mrs. Potter.

The captain turned his horse back the way he'd come and took off into a gallop.

Getting the oxen moving again, they slowly went around the Bretton's who looked like they had everything in order.

Two men were crouched down by the splintered wheel and had a toolbox beside them.

Duncan raised his arm and gave them a wave before his eyes landed on a young girl's face. She clasped a hand over her mouth and elbowed the woman beside her before pointing straight at him.

His mouth suddenly went dry as he felt the other woman's stare and he quickly reached for his hat and angled it down over his face. Sometimes he managed to forget he was walking with such a hideous mark on him, and he felt himself returning to who he once was.

And just as quickly as he felt somewhat normal, he was painfully reminded that he never could be. His old life was gone.

He would never be the handsome Duncan Clemonte, son of the wealthy merchant. He could remember the days when they held large parties and so many young women fought to dance with him. At the time, he'd been so

selfish and when he looked back, he even thought he might have been in love with himself.

He'd deserved every bit of what happened to him. Perhaps if he hadn't been so vain, that fire never would've happened. His mother and sister might still be alive.

Quickening his pace to leave Clarence and Horace to drive the oxen, he returned to his spot just ahead of them where he could walk alone, where he belonged.



They finished setting up camp for the night in a small valley that provided welcome shelter from the relentless wind that had picked up in the afternoon. It had slowed their progress and by the time they reached the spot to settle down for the night, Duncan was exhausted.

His scar ached from the burning wind rubbing it raw and he was sure he'd never be able to wash all the dirt out of his stinging eyes.

He sat away from the fire a bit, focusing on carving the piece of wood he'd found on the side of the trail.

With each slice of the knife, a bit of wood broke away and revealed the smooth inside.

"Mr. Flair is telling stories about his theater days again."

Not looking away from his carving, he heard Rose sit down beside him and sharply replied, "That's why I stay over here."

"You don't want company this evening?"

Raising an eyebrow, he glanced over at her and noticed the disappointed look in her eyes. He hated when she looked at him like that. "I don't mind your company."

"Good." She smiled, lying back on the grass and resting her hands behind her head. "Because I need some peace and quiet, and you're the only

one who will give it to me.”

Despite his resolution to remain in a bitter mood for the rest of the day, a chuckle escaped as he turned his carving over in his hands.

“What are you making?”

“A horse. Thought I might give it to one of the children.”

“You realize if you make one, you’re going to have to make fifteen more.”

He shrugged, sliding the knife along one of the grooves he’d made. “Gives me something to do. Although you might have to deliver it for me.”

“Why?”

“Children are usually scared of me.” The words tumbled out of his mouth quickly and he didn’t dare to look at Rose for her response.

“I’m sorry. I think once they get to know you, they wouldn’t be. Especially if you start giving them presents.”

He frowned, pushing harder on the knife and feeling a little relief when it sliced through the wood. “I don’t blame them for it. I imagine you were afraid of me in the beginning too.”

“Well, yes, but only because you’d bought me, and I didn’t know what you were going to do.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true,” she said softly, leaning up on her elbows. “I was more frightened by the way you spoke and stomped around.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve been kinder to you when you first arrived. You had been through so much and I—” He broke off, not knowing how to fix what had already been done.

Merry laughter rung from around the fire, and he looked toward the servants who’d quickly become his friends. The trail was a great equalizer. They’d been with him his entire life and he didn’t know how he could ever repay them for their unwavering loyalty.

“It’s alright, I understand. Sometimes it’s easier to be angry then let people see our pain.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, not wanting to talk about it further. The way Rose seemed to understand the feelings deep within his heart that even he couldn’t understand, scared him. But as he glanced down at her and found her contently lying down again with her eyes closed, he thought that maybe it wasn’t so bad to have someone who could see who he really was.

He just needed to find a way to not be afraid of the creature looking back at him in the mirror.

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CHAPTER 11



ROSE

She recognized her almost immediately as she was about to head back into camp. She'd been looking for berries and things to forage and had found lots of thistles and dandelions that would be good for raw salads.

The girl was sitting by herself on a large rock, staring out in the direction they'd come from, her long blonde waves hanging in tangles down her back.

"Good evening," she said.

The girl lifted her head, and her red-rimmed blue eyes startled her. "Good evening."

Rose struggled to find the words to say as she shifted her weight back and forth. "I...I'm sorry about your mother."

"Thank you."

"If you ever need anything, you can always talk to me. I know I'm a stranger, but I lost my mother too, many years ago. It's a difficult thing to go through."

The girl's freckled face managed a small smile. "Thank you, Miss..."

"Ripley. But please call me Rose."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Adella."

Rose nodded toward the spot beside her. "Do you mind if I sit awhile?"

"Sure." Adella shrugged. "I won't be much good company, though."

“Sometimes it’s just nice to not be alone.”

Easing herself down on the hard rock, she set her basket on the ground by her feet and looked out at the orange prairie. The sun was beginning to set, casting a fire-like glow to the sparse trees and swaying grasses.

“I just keep looking back, expecting her to be coming along the trail any minute. She was so excited for our new life and now...now we have to start one without her.”

“She’ll be with you, whether you know it or not.”

“Your mother...” Adella sniffed. “What was she like?”

She found herself closing her eyes, as she struggled to piece together her mother’s face. “I was only seven when she passed, so I don’t remember much about what she was like. Only that she was a brilliant storyteller. She used to read to me every night before I fell asleep.”

“My mother did that too. Singing too. She had the sweetest singing voice.”

Rose found her hand reaching to take Adella’s and she gave it a gentle squeeze.

A small smile, one that she could tell took a great amount of effort, adorned the girl’s face as her gaze once again returned to the prairie in front of them.

She seemed like a lovely girl and around her own age. Rose thought it might be nice to have a friend like her on the trail. She knew what it was like to lose a parent. There was still an emptiness lingering in her heart for her mother and father and she didn’t know if it would ever go away completely.

She wanted to be there for this girl, if she could.

They sat in silence for awhile, the evening chatter of birds and crickets hummed through the air.

“Adella!” someone shouted, causing Rose to jump and turn toward the harsh voice.

“Get over here! There’s work to be done!”

“Yes, stepfather,” Adella replied meekly, already jumping up and darting a few paces away before glancing back over her shoulder. “Thank you for talking to me. I’ll see you around.”

Before she had a chance to say another word, the girl had raced back in the direction of camp, and she was left to deal with the fresh grief that had formed upon her recollections of her mother.

Placing her palm on the rough stone that was cool to the touch, she lifted her gaze upward. What would her mother think of this journey she was on? Would she be upset that her beloved books had been left behind?

Rose bit at her lip and let out a long breath. She knew the books were just physical things and that she shouldn’t care so much, but the pain stung when she thought of them on the wobbly shelf in the small room of her uncle’s house. Her mother had cherished them so much and when she’d died, they’d been given to her because she had trusted Rose to love them the way books ought to be loved.

But surely her mother would understand that she would’ve taken them if she could. That she’d done all she could for her own survival. The stories themselves remained safely tucked away in her heart and that was all that mattered.

Finding her way back to the wagon, she stopped in her tracks to observe the people she’d grown to cherish during their short time together.

Mr. Flair was strumming at the banjo while Mr. Watson pretended to ignore him, but his tapping foot gave him away. Mrs. Potter clapped along and rocked back and forth.

And Duncan, to no surprise, sat a few feet away from the rest of them on an upturned log, his brow drawn in a tight scowl as he focused on the carving in his hand.

Rose had watched in wonder the other night at his ability to turn a mere piece of wood into something entirely new.

Walking over to him, she knelt down in the grass beside him and smiled. "Is there a horse yet?"

"Not yet," he replied gruffly, lifting his head which caused his dark hair to fall in front of his eyes. "But it's getting there."

"You need a haircut."

His lips tightened firmly as he paused his knife mid slice. "Not happening."

"How can you even see what you're doing? You're going to need to start braiding your hair soon to keep it out of the way."

A taunting grin danced across his face as he slicked his hand back through his hair, pushing it back into place. "And you don't think I'd look good in a braid?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I think it would be quite becoming for me."

"Quite becoming?" Rose snorted, covering her mouth with her hand.

"I grew up with a sister. I'm used to beauty talk."

She rolled her eyes, surprised by this side of him. Most of the day he kept to himself and wore a steady scowl on his face, as if threatening to attack anyone who approached him. In moments like this, though, when she took the time to sit down and talk to him, it was like a whole new man appeared.

She didn't know quite what to think of it.

"I'm not having a beauty talk with *you*."

Duncan smiled, his eyes seeming to soften a little as they met hers. "Well, I suppose a small haircut wouldn't hurt. I don't want to arrive in Oregon looking like a complete ruffian. As long as you don't cut my only good ear off."

"I'll try my best. I'm sure Mrs. Potter would do a better job than me, though."

He quickly shook his head, eyes wide. "I'm not letting her anywhere near me for that. When I was little, she used to cut it so short that I almost had none left."

"I can't believe she had the strength to look after you. I imagine you would've been a stubborn child."

"What gives you that impression?"

"Oh, I don't know. You just have that look." She shrugged, pushing herself to stand back up, "Tomorrow evening. I'll fix it. Don't try to hide."

"I wouldn't dare." He grinned, his scar wrinkling as his blue eyes twinkled.

For a moment, she found that she couldn't look away. Clearing her throat, she forced herself to turn her back to him and make her way over to the fire.

Mr. Flair was now singing along with his banjo, horribly off key and when she sat down, she caught his eye and gave him an encouraging smile.

Mr. Watson on the other hand looked as if he wanted to take the banjo out of his friend's hand and whack him over the head with it.

A small laugh escaped at the thought and as the music stretched on into the night and a few other folks from other wagons joined their fire, she felt the joy swelling in her heart.

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CHAPTER 12



DUNCAN

Days of relentless travel had passed since Rose had given him a haircut and although he would never admit it to her, he was grateful to not be fighting to keep it out of his face. He knew when the summer's heat really took its hold, it would also be nice to not have it stuck to the back of his neck.

Today Rose walked slightly ahead of him, alongside a blonde girl he recognized as the one who'd lost her mother. He often heard their laughs and he found that his heart warmed at the sound, even if he wasn't sure why.

"A fine day it appears it will be, sir," Clarence's warm voice pulled him from his thoughts, and he tore his gaze away from Rose.

"Indeed."

"And a *fine* girl Miss Ripley is, I must say."

Duncan scowled. "Clarence."

"What? She seems to like you, sir, so this is your chance if you want that inheritance of—"

He quickly raised a hand to stop him and sighed. "She doesn't like me like that, don't be foolish. She feels badly for me and is indeed a nice girl, but we're only friendly acquaintances."

Clarence's blue eyes sparkled as he nodded solemnly. "Of course, sir. My apologies."

Not wanting to talk about it further, he kept his gaze on the ground until Clarence left his side. His friend's words instantly made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to allow himself the tiniest bit of hope because it would only make it harder in the end. No one would ever love a man like him.

He didn't even care about the inheritance. He didn't need it. When they made it to Oregon, he'd build a little house somewhere and learn to farm. It wouldn't be easy, but at least it would be something he'd earned on his own.

His father's cruel joke that he'd decided to play on him during his death held no more power over him. Besides, the orphanage deserved the money more than he did anyway.

As the sun rose higher in the sky and the warmth soaked into his skin, he let out a long breath. It was just him and these wide-open prairies. He had nothing to fear, or prove.



"Good evening, sir," said a muffled voice he didn't recognize.

Duncan lifted his gaze from his carving and found a tall man with dark hair sticking out from under the brim of his hat. "Good evening."

The man didn't say anything for a few painfully, long seconds as his cold, gray eyes landed on his face. Duncan instantly saw the disgust wash across his features mixed with shock. He felt his fists clench tightly at his sides and it took every bit of strength to keep himself from punching the man square in the face.

He was in no mood for people's cruel stares. He knew his face looked horrible and mangled. Their constant reminders were unnecessary.

"That girl over there." He pointed, and Duncan followed his finger to where Rose was kneeling by the wash basin. "The one who's been traveling

with your party, is she married?”

Duncan felt his eyebrows fly up as he stared at the man in shock. “What did you just say?”

He didn’t seem to see anything wrong with what he’d said as a smug grin came to his face. “Well, she’s clearly not married to *you*, so I—”

“You will not go near her.” Anger pounded through his veins as he jumped up from the log and grabbed a handful of the man’s red shirt, pulling him mere inches away from his face.

“Woah! Sir, calm down! I mean her no harm, I only noticed how beautiful she is and had to inquire about her.”

He felt a solid hand land on his shoulder, pulling him back. “What’s going on?”

Duncan quickly let go of his hold on the awful man and was met with Horace’s disappointed face. Clarence rushed over now as well, and his gaze flashed back and forth between him and the man he’d nearly strangled.

“My apologies, I believe I offended your friend here. I should’ve introduced myself. I’m Mr. Montgomery.”

“Stephen!” A squeaky voice wailed and as Duncan looked over Mr. Montgomery’s shoulder, he found a short and stout man rushing toward them.

“It’s alright, Louis. It was a simple misunderstanding,” Mr. Montgomery said calmly, resting a hand on the man’s shoulder. “This is my brother. Louis, this is...”

Duncan crossed his arms, refusing to let his glare falter.

“I’m Mr. Watson,” Horace offered quickly.

“And I’m Mr. Flair,” Clarence said, clearing his throat. “This is Mr. Clemonte.”

“Wonderful to meet you. I was only inquiring about the fair young woman I’ve seen you traveling with.”

“Oh, you must mean Miss Ripley! Yes, she’s a wonderful girl.” Clarence beamed, and Duncan shot him a warning glance.

“Indeed, well I hope our paths shall cross again. It was nice meeting you.” Mr. Montgomery and his brother turned away and carried on past their camp. Duncan noticed how the man gazed hungrily at Rose as he walked by, and every instinct was shouting at him to protect her.

“What was that, Mr. Clemonte? There’s no need for fighting.” Mrs. Potter hurried over now, her face bright red.

“He...he...I don’t trust him,” he stammered, before his gaze landed on Rose and he found her staring at him with tightly knitted eyebrows. She shook her head before turning around and walking away from the wagon.

“Why ever not?” Mrs. Potter had a tight grip around his wrist now and he knew it would be no use trying to go after Rose until he’d dealt with the old woman’s scolding.

“He’s got his eye on Rose.”

“It’s alright, dearie. She has all of us to look out for her. She’s perfectly safe. No use starting fights and getting us kicked out of the train.”

He scowled, pulling his arm out of Mrs. Potter’s grip before stalking away. He needed to get away for a moment and clear his head. None of them had seen the way Mr. Montgomery’s eyes had looked at Rose as if he already owned her. He’d put on a friendly appearance when they’d come to stop him from ripping his throat out, but with him it had been a different story.

Out of camp, he found Rose sitting in the long grass, her legs hugged to her chest with her chin resting atop her knees.

“You shouldn’t be out here by yourself.”

“Why not?” She scowled, lifting her head as her piercing green eyes met his.

“You’re a woman and there are ill-intentioned men out here who—”

“Like men who buy women?”

Duncan felt as though she'd stabbed a knife into his gut. "You know I'm not like that. I only bought you to get you away from there and give you a chance."

She frowned, pulling her gaze away to stare back out into the quiet meadow. "I don't need you to protect me."

"Rose, I know that. I know you're smart and can look after yourself, but that doesn't mean you can fight off someone like Mr. Montgomery."

"Is that who you were fighting with?"

"He asked about you."

She let out a cruel laugh. "And so, you decided to lift him off the ground and snarl at him like a vicious wolf? How does that make you any better than him?"

"I was just trying to—"

"I don't care what you were trying to do. I appreciate you looking out for me and rescuing me that day, but there's no need for violence."

He let out a long breath, trying to think through his next words. He didn't want to fight with her and yet everything he said seemed to be wrong. "I'm sorry."

A small smile came to her face, and she nodded. "It's alright."

"Will you come back to camp now?"

"In a minute."

He forced himself to bite his tongue and not argue it further. He'd already learned that this woman was fierce and stubborn so it would likely only make her stay out here longer if he tried. "Be careful."

"I will."

Turning away from her, he slid his hands into his pockets and slowly made his way back to camp. He knew that the danger had always been there, even before his encounter with Mr. Montgomery, but now that it had happened, he felt unsettled.

It had been an overwhelming evening and now that his desire to punch everyone had faded, he was left with a dull pain that he couldn't quite understand where it was coming from.

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CHAPTER 13



ROSE

She walked in blissful silence alongside her new friend. Adella, despite the intense grief she was going through, was such a bright spot in even the most difficult days on the trail.

They now walked together every day as Rose made sure their wagons remained one in front of the other. She hadn't spoken much to Adella's family as they seemed more reserved, but she did notice how sharply they spoke to her friend. She wasn't sure what to think of it but supposed the grief the family was working through was creating tension that wasn't her business to get involved with.

Still, she liked Adella's steady presence beside her and often admired her friend's beautiful, blonde hair and twinkling blue eyes. Growing up, she'd often felt envious of the little girls who had blonde hair because beside them, her flat, brown hair seemed so dull.

"Hello there...Miss Ripley, right?"

Startled by the deep voice, she spun her head around to where a large man now walked alongside her. She instantly recognized him as the man Duncan had nearly fought with a few days ago. She remembered Duncan's concerns about him and felt the muscles in her shoulders tighten.

"Yes, that's me and this is my friend, Miss Lawson."

“Wonderful to meet you,” he said, flashing a bright smile. “I’m Mr. Montgomery.”

“Nice to meet you,” Adella said kindly, though, Rose felt her friend’s grip on her arm tighten.

Mr. Montgomery removed his hat and slicked a hand back through his dark hair, letting out a long sigh. “A beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Rose agreed, hoping he would soon leave. There was something about his gaze that frightened her and every time she met his eyes, a heavy feeling settled in her stomach. She didn’t know if it was simply because of Duncan’s warning that she felt uneasy around him or not.

“And even more beautiful now that I see you.”

She gnawed at her bottom lip, moving closer to Adella’s side, suddenly feeling trapped in this wide-open prairie.

“So, is Mr. Clemonte a relative of yours?”

“No, he’s just a friend.”

“I see. What happened to his face?”

“Excuse me? That’s rather personal.” Rose scowled, anger settling into her bones. How dare he ask such a cruel question?

Mr. Montgomery laughed, shaking his head. “My apologies, I was only curious.”

Biting her tongue to keep herself from speaking the words she desperately wanted to say, she hoped he would take her silence as his time to leave. To her dismay, he seemed undeterred.

“Miss Ripley? Miss Lawson? Mrs. Potter has requested your help. Her ankle is bothering her, and she needs someone to walk with.”

Relief washed over her as she let out a long breath, turning to find Duncan who was staring venomously at Mr. Montgomery.

“Well, nice to make your acquaintance. No doubt we will meet again.” The man gave her a crooked smile before walking away.

“Oh, thank you, your timing is perfect. I thought he would never leave. Is Mrs. Potter alright?”

“Yes, yes, there’s nothing the matter with her ankle. I could tell he was bothering you so thought I’d get you away from him.”

“A true hero. Thank you, Mr. Clemonte,” Adella said.

“Of course. Though, you might want to walk with Mrs. Potter now, in case he returns.”

Rose nodded and gave him a warm smile as they passed and went to join Mrs. Potter who was humming a cheery tune.

“Ah, hello, girls. Come to keep an old lady company?”

“Nonsense, you’re not that old.” Rose laughed, resting a hand on Mrs. Potter’s shoulder.

“My bones say otherwise.”

As they continued along the endless road, she found her gaze landing on Duncan every now and then. He walked with Mr. Flair and Mr. Watson, helping to drive the oxen, but every now and then he looked back and she met his eyes.

And when he smiled at her, she felt safe, despite knowing there were men like Mr. Montgomery on the trail who had their eyes on her. She knew Duncan would look out for her, as would the rest of her company.

She hadn’t had someone care for her like this since her father and it felt like she could finally breathe again.

In a strange way, she was grateful her uncle had sold her that day because if he hadn’t, she likely would’ve been trapped as a servant her entire life. Now, though, she was free.

There was nothing but bright blue skies and green grass around her. Birds flew overhead and little mice scuttled under their feet as they passed through the long grass.

Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to soak in this moment to hold on to forever.

CHAPTER 14



DUNCAN

“I hope Mr. Montgomery didn’t say anything to upset you earlier,” he said, glancing up from his carving to where Rose now sat beside him.

“I’m alright, don’t worry. Thank you for rescuing me...again.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as her warm, green eyes met his. Light from the fire danced in them and for a moment, he couldn’t gather his thoughts. “I’m almost done with the horse.”

She smiled as he offered it to her. He watched as she turned it over in her hands and ran a finger along the grooved mane. “It’s beautiful. Truly. The children are going to love it.”

“Will you give it to one of them for me?”

“Duncan, you can give it to them yourself. They have no reason to fear you.”

“Thank you for saying that, but I’ve come to accept it. I know I look scary.”

She frowned, handing the horse back to him. “You’re not scary. Your eyes are kind, unlike people such as Mr. Montgomery.”

Burning tears stung at the back of his mouth and he forced himself to clear his throat. He knew she was probably just saying that to be kind, but it felt nice to hear the words. “Thank you, Rose.”

She was quiet for a few moments, and he found himself unable to tear his gaze away from her. Her chin was lifted upward, and her face seemed to light up as the moonlight shone down on her.

Her long, dark waves hung down her back, almost touching the ground and she was truly beautiful.

“How about I come with you, when you give the toy to one of the children?” she said eventually, turning her head back to face him.

Trying to pretend he hadn’t been staring, he quickly went back to narrowing out the spot for the eyes with the tip of his knife. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

He nodded, not daring to look up to meet her gaze. “Of course.”

“What are you going to do once we get to Oregon?”

Letting out a long breath, he paused his carving. “Buy a piece of land and build a little house there. Start a farm and live out my days in the quiet solitude.”

“That sounds nice.”

He frowned, looking at her now. The thought of having to say goodbye to her frightened him, but he’d promised that once they arrived in Oregon, she could go her own way. She deserved a chance to build a new life for herself. “What about you?”

“I...I don’t know. Perhaps I can stay with you? I’m good at cleaning and cooking. I could keep the house for you and...and you wouldn’t have to pay me anything. Just having a home would be enough.”

“Rose,” he said, hesitantly resting his hand on her arm. When she didn’t pull away, he could feel the flicker of hope in his chest which he instantly tried to push away. “Of course, you’re welcome to stay with us, but I wouldn’t ask you to be a servant. I’m past the days of having servants. Having your friendship would be enough.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as she smiled softly. “Thank you.”

“But by the time we get there, things might change. You could meet a nice man, someone much better than the likes of Mr. Montgomery and I would want you to be happy.”

“Thank you, Duncan. I want you to be happy too.”

As he looked down at her face, it took every ounce of strength to not kiss her, and he forced himself to stand up. “I think I’m going to hit the hay. We have another long day tomorrow.”

For a brief second, he thought he saw sadness wash over her features before a steady smile returned. “Good night, Duncan.”

“Good night, Rose.” He quickly turned away from her. Heading to the safety of his bed under the wagon, he climbed under the blanket and heaved a sigh. He had to let go of this foolish hope before he did something to ruin the friendship he had with her.

She didn’t deserve a broken man like him. And he certainly didn’t deserve a girl as wonderful as her.

It took a long while for him to fall asleep and when he did, his dreams left him restless. When the sun finally broke along the horizon and golden light began to settle over camp, he felt more exhausted than he had when he’d gone to bed.

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CHAPTER 15



ROSE

As she made breakfast that morning, she kept looking up at Duncan for any signs of what she thought she'd felt last night.

She'd been sure he felt the same way as her when his eyes had met hers, but his abrupt departure confused her. Perhaps she'd been wrong, and he wanted nothing more than friendship from her.

It was just the two of them in their little camp right now. Mrs. Potter was making up the beds in the wagon, and Mr. Flair and Mr. Watson had taken the oxen to graze.

"Is the horse ready?" she asked, grateful to break the uneasy silence.

"What?"

"The carving? For the children?"

"Oh." He nodded slowly, scratching at his chin, "Yes, right."

She forced a smile, pushing herself to stand up. The bacon was cooking happily over the fire, and it would be a bit before it needed to be flipped.

"Shall we take it to them?"

"Sure," he said quickly, grabbing the carving from the back of the wagon.

Waiting for him to join her, they walked around camp and she waited for him to decide which child to give it to. She could only imagine the

fighths that would be started over that toy, and she knew he'd likely be asked to make more.

"How about her?" she asked, realizing he wasn't going to approach on his own.

A young girl she'd seen a few times faithfully trotting alongside her mother, despite her little legs, was drawing in the dirt with a thin stick.

"Alright." He nodded but didn't take a step toward her.

Grabbing his arm, she tugged him along behind her and rather felt like she was introducing a shy child. Was he really trying to hide behind her?

The thought almost made her laugh as she turned to force him to face the little girl.

She now stared up at them with curious, brown eyes and she wiped at her forehead with her chubby fingers, leaving a streak of dirt.

"Hello there." Rose smiled, kneeling down in front of her.

"Mama said I can't talk to strangers."

"Well, that's good advice. We only wanted to bring you a gift. You see, my friend makes beautiful toys." She glanced up at Duncan, giving him an encouraging smile. "Would you like to see?"

The girl nodded warily, and Rose noticed the mother approaching now, wiping her hands on her muddy apron.

"Yes, please," the girl finally said, her eyes landing on Duncan.

Rose could see the confusion and uncertainty wash over her, and she looked like she would get up at any moment and run away.

But Duncan knelt down now, and a warm smile crinkled his face as he held the little wooden horse out to her.

She glanced up at her mother who now stood beside her, before finally taking it and turning it over in her small hands.

"What do you say, Prissie?" the woman prompted, giving Duncan a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Mister. It's the most beautiful toy I've ever had."

“You’re very welcome.”

The girl hugged it to her chest and let out a high-pitched squeal before jumping to her feet and showing it to her mother.

“Yes, yes, it’s very beautiful. Thank you so much, you didn’t have to do that.” The woman’s tired eyes met hers, and Rose wanted to pull the woman into a hug.

She found it exhausting each day as it was, so she couldn’t imagine how tiring it would be to have a little one to take care of as well.

“It’s no problem, ma’am.” Duncan nodded his head to her before the mother and child walked hand-in-hand back to their wagon. “Well, that went better than expected.”

Rose smiled, resting a hand on his arm. “See, even the children can see the kindness in your eyes.”

“Most of them just run and scream, no matter how much kindness I show in my eyes.” He shrugged, his gaze landing on where her hand still remained on his bicep.

Quickly pulling it away, she felt the heat rising in her neck as they made their way back to their own camp.

Mrs. Potter was now crouched in front of the simmering fire and as they approached, she could instantly smell the savory aroma of the bacon fat sizzling in the pan.

Her stomach flipped over with excitement, and she couldn’t wait for it to be ready. There was something about these long days that made a girl rather hungry.

Soon enough, she was seated around the fire with her new friends, enjoying a hearty meal that would give them the strength they needed for the day ahead.



The morning had passed in conversation with Adella and the sun now shone down in warm waves.

Their wagon clattered behind her, squeaking and squealing as it lurched over the rough bumps. The last party to go through this section of the trail had been met with a relentless rain that had left the trail with deep ruts.

It had slowed their travel quite a bit and she found herself growing anxious. She knew they were to make it to Fort Kearny within a few days and she'd been looking forward to the chance to stop for a whole day to rest, gather supplies, and get ready for the next part of the journey.

This delay meant longer out on the trail, and she longed for the civilization that was promised to lie ahead.

Duncan walked ahead of them a ways and she found her gaze land on his back. His dark green shirt had come untucked from his pants in places and the sleeves were rolled up past his elbows.

From here she could see the red and purple swirls of the scar on his arm, and she felt tears sting at her eyes. She knew he'd been badly burned, but she hadn't realized just how much. His arm looked so painful, and she didn't know how it didn't seem to bother him.

As she forced herself to blink the tears away, she noticed him stumble and almost fall forward before catching himself.

She craned her neck to see what he'd tripped over, expecting to see a rock or hidden rut, but where he was walking appeared flat.

Watching him closer, she realized they were catching up to him as his pace had slowed and his feet struggled to remain in a straight line.

Glancing to her friend to see if she'd noticed, she found Adella's gaze locked to the side, staring out into the empty prairie. Adella often disappeared at times during the day. She was physically present, but her heart seemed to wander somewhere far beyond her reach, and Rose knew the look. Her friend was walking through deep grief, much like she'd faced when her father had passed.

Not wanting to disturb her, she shook her head and told herself she was imagining things. Duncan was fine and was likely just tired.

They carried on and she focused on the murmurs of oxen braying nearby and the clatter of the wagon.

The next thing she knew, she watched in shock as Duncan fell to the ground and curled into a lifeless lump, his face shoved down into the dusty dirt.

“Duncan!” she shrieked, pulling her hand out of the nook of Adella’s elbow as she ran over to him. She could hear shouting behind her, but she couldn’t make out what anyone was saying.

Reaching for his shoulder, she managed to push him onto his back and his head rolled lifelessly to the side.

“Duncan? Duncan, can you hear me?” she said quickly, pressing a hand to his chest, afraid to find his heart had ceased beating. To her relief, she could feel the faint vibration of his heart pounding against his ribs, and she quickly moved to cradle his head.

The rest of her party was with her now, all kneeling down around Duncan. Mrs. Potter barked orders while Mr. Watson’s face flushed white. She was sure her own looked the same.

Finally, a groan rumbled in his throat and his eyes opened slightly.

“Mr. Clemonte, what happened? Are you alright?” Mrs. Potter sobbed, pressing a hand to his forehead.

“I just became dizzy, I’m alright, but—“ Before he had a chance to finish, he rolled onto his side and was sick all over Mrs. Potter’s skirts.

“Oh, my goodness!” Mr. Watson cried, jumping up to get out of the way before collapsing as well.

“Horace?” Mr. Flair moved to his friend’s side, as Rose let out a shaky breath. Taking in the horrible scene around her, she wondered how things had become so bad, so quickly.

When she looked at Duncan's pale face again, she thought for a moment he looked like death.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I'm so...sorry. I'm sorry," he choked out, staring up at Mrs. Potter as a tear ran down the side of his face.

"It's okay. Don't you worry about that, Mr. Clemonte. Let's just get you well, shall we?" Mrs. Potter frowned, resting her hand along his scarred cheek.

Cholera.

The word suddenly shouted at her, and she forced herself to push it away for now. She needed to focus on helping to make room in the wagon for Duncan to lie down. Then finding the laudanum for the pain and some camphor for the cough that would come, if he made it... She forced that thought away. The medicine was packed somewhere within all the crates.

A few people had already died within a day from the disease that had been picked up somewhere and she knew of a few who were still sick. One being a small child.

And now there was no doubt that Duncan had it. Fear flooded her heart as she thought of standing around his grave crying just as she'd seen so many others do with their own loved ones.

She didn't know what she would do. She cared for him so much and she realized now just how much she valued his friendship. What would she do without him?

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CHAPTER 16



DUNCAN

Darkness. Blinding heat coursing through his veins. Distant cries and conversations.

He tried to call for help. His voice was lost.

Alone in the unshakeable darkness.

He heard her. *Rose*.

He longed to see her face. To tell her not to cry.

He was just sleeping. He'd be alright.

Duncan.

She was calling him. No matter how much he tried to awaken for her, darkness shoved him down, down, down.

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CHAPTER 17



ROSE

Duncan had been in and out of consciousness all day, and she'd refused to leave his side. Even when Mrs. Potter had offered to take over.

The thought of not having anything to busy herself with, knowing he was in the back of the wagon in pain, was impossible. At least this way, she could reassure herself that he was alive.

And she would do anything she could to keep him that way.

Sweat beaded on his forehead and she reached for the cloth she'd soaked in the bucket of water. Wringing it out, she turned to face him and wiped the perspiration from his skin before laying it across his forehead.

"Oh, Duncan," she said softly, her voice trembling. "Please be alright. Please."

She'd lost count of how many times she'd said that today. She didn't know if he could even hear her right now, but she had to try. Perhaps if she said please enough, he'd have no choice but to get better.

The wagon lurched slightly, and she fell to the side as she reached to steady the sloshing bucket.

A pained moan passed from his lips, and she crawled back to his side, resting a hand on his arm.

"It's okay. You're alright."

“Rose.” His eyes flicked open as his hand came up to grab hold of her wrist.

“Duncan, it’s okay. I’m here.”

“I don’t...I don’t...” he stammered, trying to sit up on one elbow.

“No, no. Lie back down.” She pressed her hand gently to his shoulder and without protest, his head returned to the pillow.

His eyes seemed an even brighter blue in comparison to his paled skin and she could see the fear ablaze in them.

“You’re going to be okay.”

“Go,” he managed, closing his eyes tight. “I don’t...want...you to get si...sick.”

She frowned. “I don’t think it’s contagious. It just seems to be choosing people randomly. I’ll be alright.”

“You don’t know.”

“Please, I don’t want to go. I...I need to feel like I’m doing something.”

He sighed, raising an arm to cover his face. “Alright.”

“Go back to sleep. You need to rest.”

“But it’s dark.”

“What do you mean?”

Before he could reply, his arm slid off his face and he was out again. She sniffed, forcing the tears to stay away. There was no time for crying.

“Rose?”

Turning toward the voice, she found Adella looking up at her from the opening in the back of the wagon, her eyebrows drawn close together.

“How is he?”

“The same. I think. Maybe worse. I...I don’t know.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a break? The fresh air might make you feel better.”

She shook her head quickly, pushing back the strands of hair that fell in front of her face. “No. No. I want to be with him but thank you.”

“How is the water?”

“We’ll need more soon.”

“Alright, I’ll let Mr. Flair know. We should be stopping for the night within a couple of hours anyway.”

She nodded, managing to give her friend a small smile before turning back to Duncan.

His eyelids fluttered rapidly, and his hand was warm in hers.

Please be alright. Please. Please.

She’d heard the words of people around campfires about this illness. *Fine in the morning, dead before noon.*

No. She couldn’t think of those things right now. Duncan could survive. She was determined that he would not die.

And when she was determined, she wasn’t quick to give up.

She would be grateful to stop soon. She wanted some water boiled for him to drink because the canteen was almost out. And the bumping of the wagon was taking its toll on him. In the brief moments he was awake, she could see the pain flash across his face with each jarring movement.

There was nothing she could do now, other than hold tightly to his hand and close her eyes, praying as hard as she could.



“Water...please.”

“Mrs. Potter is boiling some now. It’ll be a couple of minutes, I’m sorry.”

He nodded, closing his eyes again and she felt his warm hand find hers. Tightening her fingers around his, she gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, Rose.”

“It’s alright, Duncan.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re on the trail. We stopped for the night now, so hopefully you can get some more rest.”

“We aren’t...in Oregon yet?”

She frowned, shaking her head. “No, not yet.”

“I...I so badly wanted to see it.”

“You will see it.”

“I was going to build you a beautiful cabin. I’m—” He was interrupted by a fit of coughing and his hand tightened its hold on hers until she was sure her fingers would break.

When he rested his head back on the pillow again, his breathing was heavy. “Stay...stay with Mrs. Potter. She’ll look...after you.”

“Duncan, stop talking like that. You’re going to be alright, and you’ll see Oregon and get to build your cabin.” Tears stung the back of her throat as she looked down at his hand in her own. She wanted that future for them too and the thought of it being torn away from her, when she only realized now just how much she wanted it, tore at her heart.

She loved him. She didn’t know how or when it had happened, but it was true. And now she could lose him before ever getting the chance to see what the future might hold for them.

His head rolled to the side again, and his breathing slowed. The laudanum was doing the trick, he’d fallen asleep again, and she knew she needed to make sure she had water for him the next time he awoke.

Not letting go of his hand, a warm tear slid down her cheek and dripped off her chin. His skin was so pale with a bluish touch to it as she rubbed some more camphor into his chest for the horrible cough. His scar looked even more red and scary now and she found her other hand coming to rest on the jagged skin.

He’d already survived the impossible once. He could do it again.

“I love you,” she whispered.

She thought she felt his fingers tighten around her hand for a split second but knew that she'd likely just imagined it.

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CHAPTER 18



DUNCAN

I love you too.

They were in a forest with great towering pines and sunshine filtered in through the boughs, casting sparkling light on the mossy ground. In front of him stood a quaint log cabin and smoke billowed up from the stone chimney, dancing up into the sky.

He looked to her.

Rose.

They'd made it to Oregon.

Everything was alright now.

He held out his hand to her and her warm fingers slid into his own. Music sung from somewhere in the distance as he pulled her close and they danced into the night.

It was a nice dream. For he knew it couldn't be real. But for now, he let himself pretend that it was possible.

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CHAPTER 19



ROSE

Days had gone by. Sometimes he seemed a little better, but then the next minute he was worse.

Mrs. Potter had managed to convince her to leave the wagon today. She'd been so persistent with her nagging, and Rose didn't have the energy left in her to argue that she was fine.

So, she walked slowly alongside Adella, who had her arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

They didn't speak, but she could feel her friend's love and comfort soaking into her heart. It was a dreary day today with streaky gray clouds covering the sun and mist hovering in the air.

They were a day out from Fort Kearny, and she couldn't wait to get there. They'd run out of medicine to give Duncan and even though she didn't know if it was even helping, she was desperate to get more.

"Miss Ripley," a cheery voice sung out. "It's good to see you out again, getting some fresh air."

Lifting her gaze, she found Mr. Montgomery and his brother now walking alongside her.

"Good morning," she managed, wishing she could slap the smile right off that silly man's face.

"How is Mr. Clemonte?"

“The same. We’re hoping to get more medicine in Fort Kearny.”

“I don’t believe medicine has helped many of the folks who’ve been ill, but I sincerely hope it will cure him.” Mr. Montgomery’s dark eyes met hers. “But perhaps, as sad as it might be, it would be best for the poor man to be put out of his misery.”

She stopped in her tracks, anger flooding her veins as she turned to face him. “What is wrong with you?”

“Rose,” Adella said softly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

Pulling away from her friend, she ignored her warning and looked up at Mr. Montgomery, daring him to continue.

“I...I only mean that it might be a mercy for him, what with the quality of his life even before becoming ill.” He shrugged, a clearly forced frown coming to his face.

Before she had a chance to think about what she was doing, she felt the sting of her palm as it made contact with the side of his face.

She heard Adella gasp behind her, but she didn’t care. How dare he say such a thing? She’d seen how cruel people were to Duncan, just because of his appearance and it wasn’t fair. He was just as good a man as anyone else.

“I think you should go.”

Mr. Montgomery’s thick eyebrows were drawn together, and his venomous eyes met hers. “You will come to regret that.”

She watched as he turned and stomped away, his brother struggling to keep up with him.

Biting at her bottom lip, she looked down at the hand she’d used to strike him, and tears blurred her vision. Her anger had gotten the best of her. She’d never hit anyone before.

Her father would be so disappointed.

Feeling her legs shake, she crumpled to the ground and didn’t bother fighting the tears as she felt Adella rush to her side.

“It’s okay, Rose. He’s gone now.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit him.”

She frowned. “Well, he deserved it, even if it was wrong.”

Rose managed a small laugh. If sweet and kind Adella thought he deserved it, then it must be true. And it had felt rather good to see the look on his face afterward. She was sure he’d never had someone stand up to him in his entire life.

“Miss Ripley, are you alright? What happened?” Mr. Watson stood in front of her now, and she lifted her head to look up at him.

“I’m alright, but Mr. Montgomery might be angry with me now.”

“If I’d been close enough, I would’ve knocked him over the head too,” Mr. Flair announced, his kind eyes finding hers.

“Clarence,” Mr. Watson said sharply. “Violence isn’t the answer.”

“Oh dear, there’s my conscience again.” Mr. Flair chuckled, offering a hand to her.

Taking it, she was pulled to her feet, and she managed a faint smile. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, Miss.” He tipped his hat before heading back to his spot alongside the oxen who’d decided to carry on without him.

She felt Adella’s hand slip into hers and she was grateful for her friend being by her side today. She wasn’t sure she would have the strength to keep going without her.



Her eyes landed on the wooden marker sticking up out of the dirt. A name was carved into it. Phylis Michael.

Bowing her head as they passed, she wondered who that woman was. What her story had been. Had her family and friends made it the rest of the way to Oregon?

They'd passed so many graves on the side of the trail, often unmarked and only noticeable by the few stones sometimes laid in a cluster atop them.

She couldn't stop her mind from wandering where she tried so hard to keep it from. Duncan.

Someday, someone could go by in the next wagon train and only see his name. They wouldn't know who he was. He'd only be another name. A reminder of the loss and sacrifices made on the trail.

Her bones ached with each step as the blisters on her feet rubbed raw, but she found that she no longer hated the pain. Because so long as she could feel pain, it meant she was alive.

And with the amount of death she'd seen over these past few weeks, she knew that every breath was something to be grateful for.

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CHAPTER 20



DUNCAN

When he opened his eyes, all he could see was bright streaking light across his vision. He tried to look around, but nothing came into focus.

Blinking hard, his surroundings slowly came to him.

He was in the back of the wagon. The cream canvas cover was above him and stacked crates were pushed to the side.

His eyes eventually landed on Rose, sitting with her legs pulled to her chest and her head resting on the side of the wagon. The way her neck was bent looked so uncomfortable, but he was glad to see she was sleeping.

He couldn't remember much of what had happened each time he'd awoken, but Rose's face remained the most in his memories. He hated people having to look after him.

Ever since the fire when he'd had nurses fussing over him night and day, it felt like a reminder that he would never be strong enough to look after himself. And now, he'd gone back to having someone take care of him.

Her eyebrows were knitted closely together, and she looked paler than normal. He hoped she hadn't gotten sick too.

Licking his cracked lips, he eased himself up onto his elbows and craned his neck to see out the back. How many days had it been?

The sun was shining and all he could see was dust hanging in the air and a team of oxen a few paces away, pulling their own wagon.

His throat stung as he tried to swallow, and he searched for any water. To Rose's side was a large, wooden bucket and he could hear the liquid sloshing inside.

But had that water been boiled? He'd heard rumours that cholera could be spread by drinking water that was infected. He thought back to that one evening when he'd been sitting by the river by himself and had decided a little bit of fresh, cold water wouldn't hurt. It had been a long, hot day and he'd been so thirsty.

Was that what had made him sick?

His head was pounding as he tried to think about it, and he managed to crawl over to the bucket.

Glancing up at Rose, he hesitated. He hated to wake her when he knew she was probably exhausted. And he felt well enough to get it himself, if only he could know for sure it was safe.

As he looked at her lovely face, he let out a long breath. He didn't want to die. He wanted to stay here with her.

"Rose?" he managed to say, his voice hoarse.

Instantly, her eyes opened, and she jumped up. "Duncan? What is it? Are you alright? Get back to bed."

He lifted his hands in front of him defensively. "It's alright. I...I'm feeling okay. I just wanted some water."

"Of course. I'm sorry," she said quickly, moving to reach for a canteen lying on her other side.

Relief rushed through him as he realized the other water must've been for the damp cloths on his head.

She undid the lid and came to kneel beside him, holding it up for him. Shaking his head, he reached to take it from her. He felt strong enough to do

it himself and if he could prevent her from having to take care of him any longer, it would make him feel much better.

He took a few long, deep sips and the burning sensation in his throat subsided, although his mouth still felt dry—the laudanum no doubt.

“Thank you,” he said, passing the canteen back to her.

She nodded, her eyebrows drawn tight with concern as she reached toward his face. He didn’t try to move away as he felt her cool fingers press against his forehead.

“Your fever seems to have gone down a little.”

“I feel better, I think. My head feels sore but it’s clear for the first time in a while.”

“Well don’t be in a rush. Get back to bed and lie down.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Doctor.”

She scowled at him, but a slight smile dimpled her cheeks as he eased himself back down on to the pillow.

Folding his hands over his stomach, he let out a long breath. His whole body ached, and his eyes longed to close again, but he didn’t want to sleep again. Not right now. He just wanted to look at Rose because he thought she was all the medicine he’d need.

“Go to sleep, Duncan.” She secured the lid back on the canteen and cast it aside.

“I don’t want to.”

“Don’t make me sing you a lullaby.”

Despite the pain pounding against his temple, he found himself smiling. “I think that would be lovely.”

“Well, it’s not happening.” She shrugged as he felt her hand rest atop his. “But perhaps I could get Mr. Flair to come sing for you.”

He chuckled, before grimacing at the burning pain in his ribs. “Please don’t. Haven’t I been through enough?”

Glancing down at where her small hand lingered on his own, he realized she was touching his scarred skin and yet, she didn't seem disgusted by it. Her tired green eyes were focused on his face, and he was glad to see a slight smile on her otherwise troubled face.

He hated that he'd caused so much worry.

"Thank you, Rose."

"You're welcome, now get some rest, alright?"

"Alright," he agreed, already feeling his eyelids growing too heavy to fight any longer and he allowed his eyes to close. As sleep took its hold again, he could feel her hand remain on his and in that moment, he knew everything was going to be okay.

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CHAPTER 21



ROSE

When they finally reached Fort Kearny, she felt like a breath of fresh air washed over her. Duncan was doing better after days of being in and out of sleep, and they could resupply their wagon which was admittedly running low on many things.

She could remember looking at the wagon before they'd left Independence and thinking that their supplies would last them the entire trip. There'd been enough stuff packed to provide for a family of fifteen, or at least, that's what she'd thought.

How wrong she'd been.

As they set up camp on the outskirts of the fort, the air around her felt more cheerful. Other travelers laughed and mingled with one another, some trading supplies and others just sharing stories. They'd made it through the first part of their journey together.

They'd lost some people along the way and together they'd grieved and carried on, encouraging each other when times got tough.

She lifted her gaze to where Adella was bustling around her own wagon, while her stepfather and stepsisters sat in front of the fire, barking orders at her.

She'd seen the way her poor friend was treated, and she often longed to tell them off. She knew this would likely only make things worse for

Adella, though, so she managed to hold her tongue.

Deciding she better check on Duncan, she moved to the back of the wagon and found him trying to sit up.

“Do you need anything?”

“Yes, to get out of this God-forsaken *wagon*,” he snapped.

Blinking in surprise, she frowned and tried to figure out how she was going to get him to stay in the wagon. He was impossibly stubborn.

Before she had a chance to reply, she watched as his face softened a little and he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Rose. I’m just frustrated, but I shouldn’t have blasphemed or taken it out on you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have, but I understand. It’s alright.”

“I want some fresh air. It’s too stuffy in here and I want to see the fort.”

Resting one hand on her hip, she looked around to see if Mrs. Potter or anyone else was nearby for their opinion. But it looked as though everyone had disappeared, and she knew Duncan wouldn’t take no for an answer anyway.

“Fine, but just for a little bit. I know you might be feeling better, but you still need to rest.” She frowned, stepping away from the back as he crawled toward the door and swung his legs down toward the ground.

When his feet landed on the grass, he stumbled forward, and she gasped, rushing to grab his arm. Once he was steady, she looked up at him to make sure he was alright.

“I’m okay,” he said, seeming to know her thoughts.

“Alright, here.” She guided him to the small bonfire and once he was safely seated, she went to get an armful of logs from the pile Mr. Watson had set up.

Carefully placing them on the fire, she wiped the splinters and dirt off her hands onto her apron and moved to sit down beside Duncan.

“Do you need anything? Water? A blanket?” She pressed her fingers against his temple before he pushed her hand away. His blue eyes met hers

and he let out a small laugh.

“Rose, stop fussing. I’m fine.”

“I...I’m just worried about you. I’m sorry.”

She felt his calloused hand slip around hers and his fingers brushed across her knuckles.

“It’s alright, I appreciate you looking after me. I know you must be exhausted, but I think I’m past the worst of it now. I feel okay, so I want you to stop worrying over me.”

“Okay,” she managed to reply, tearing her eyes away from his, not wanting him to see the tears threatening to spill out.

An upbeat fiddle song hummed in the air, along with the muffled claps and roaring laughter. She looked over her shoulder and saw a group of people dancing around a fire a few camps over.

Women were twirling wildly, their skirts spinning around them while the men caught them in their arms.

“Are you alright?” Duncan’s voice pulled her away from the joyful scene and she realized he hadn’t let go of her hand.

Turning to look at him again, she forced a nod. “Yes, why?”

“You look tired, that’s all.”

“Now who’s doing the worrying?” She sighed, using her free hand to push large strands of hair that had come loose from her braid, behind her ear.

He shrugged, his gaze landing on the fire. “I hope Mr. Montgomery hasn’t bothered you while I was out.”

At the remembrance of what she’d done, she felt warmth rising up her neck and into her ears. In all her worry over Duncan, she’d almost forgotten about the incident. “I...I handled it.”

His eyes quickly found hers again and he raised an eyebrow. “Do I want to know?”

“Oh, I’m sure Mr. Flair would be happy to tell you the story.”

“That can’t be good.” A slight smile came to his face. “We’re camping out here for two nights, correct?”

She nodded.

“We should go for a picnic tomorrow then,” he said.

“A picnic?” She hesitated, before continuing, “You’ve only just gotten better, I don’t think you should be—”

“Rose, I’m fine, I promise. We won’t go far.”

Thinking about it for a moment, she eventually nodded and felt him squeeze her hand. “Alright, I’d like that.”

Silence settled between them as she looked down at their hands. Something had changed between them since he’d been sick and it had her heart skipping in her chest, almost dizzyingly.

“Ah! Master, you are out of the wagon and back by the fire! What a pleasant surprise!” Mr. Flair’s enthusiastic voice pulled her from her thoughts, and she felt Duncan’s hand quickly slip out of her own, much to her disappointment. “I have just the story for you. About the fair Missus here giving Mr. Montgomery exactly what he deserved.”

She groaned, covering her face with her hands. She’d known it would only be a matter of time before the event came up. For some reason, Mr. Flair found it extremely amusing, and she knew he wouldn’t let her forget it anytime soon.

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CHAPTER 22



DUNCAN

The afternoon sun shone down on her, making her look even more beautiful and his breath caught in his throat as he looked at her. Her bright yellow dress trailed behind her, the ribbons twirling in the wind, and her brown waves hung loose down her back.

She looked almost magical.

When he'd suggested going for a picnic the evening before, he thought he must've still been suffering from a bit of a fever at the time. Now that he was thinking clearly again, he wondered if she only agreed because she didn't want to hurt him.

But in the end, he knew he'd only have himself to blame. No matter how hard he'd tried not to, he'd fallen in love with her. Of course, he didn't expect her to feel the same. Not when he looked the way he did. She deserved more.

"How about here?" She turned to face him, a soft smile on her face.

As he looked down at her, he could see the exhaustion in her eyes, and he was sure his own face looked the same. He still felt weak and sore from the sickness that had taken its toll on him but being outside and moving around again was helping.

"Sure." He nodded, setting the basket down in the shade next to a small cluster of trees.

Once they were seated and had their lunch set out, he almost laughed at the sight of it. They each had a bacon sandwich with a couple of berries Mrs. Potter had found near camp. And a fresh glass of milk Rose had collected before leaving.

She took a sip of it and smiled. "Daisy gives the sweetest milk. She's the best cow I've ever seen."

"Daisy? Since when is her name, Daisy?"

"Since Mr. Flair told me that she didn't have a name, and I gave the poor thing one," she scolded, still wearing a bright grin.

Raising an eyebrow, he let out a laugh. Of course, she had.

"To be fair, I only bought her a week before we left."

"Well, her name's Daisy." She shrugged.

"I like it. It suits her."

They ate in silence for awhile, the only sound being the chatter of cicadas and the rippling wind rustling through the leaves above.

"Tell me about your family," he finally said, relieved to have found something to talk about.

She let out a pained laugh, shaking her head. "Well, you met my uncle."

"Yes, a horribly, unpleasant man. But what about before you lived with him? You don't talk about it much."

"It was the happiest time of my life, but I suppose talking about it brings all those good memories to the surface and sometimes, it's painful to know they'll never come back again. I lived in a small town, a few hours east of Independence and my father was a peddler as I think I mentioned."

"Yes. I forgot to ask, though. What did he sell?"

"He made the most beautiful clocks, pocket watches, music boxes and all kinds of things like that. I can remember our kitchen table always being cluttered with his latest project, so we'd have to eat on the floor." A sad smile came to her face, as she sighed. "After my mother passed, he

sometimes took me with him from place to place to sell his goods. I loved exploring the world with him.”

“He sounds like a good man. I’m sorry you lost him.”

“Yes, he was. I miss him every day. As for my mother, I was young when she got sick, so I don’t remember her as much as I’d like. I do remember her telling me wondrous stories, though. She was the world’s greatest storyteller and she left me her small collection of books. I’m sure I have the words of all those books memorized, even though I no longer have them.”

“Where are they?”

“At my uncles. Or more likely they’ve been burnt by now. They weren’t in very good condition, so I would imagine Uncle would’ve gotten rid of them.”

He watched as tears flooded her bright green eyes and she quickly turned her head away.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s silly to be upset. I’m sorry. They’re only books. They can be replaced.”

“I know what it’s like to lose things that you cherish. Even though they’re only physical objects, sometimes they carry a life of their own with them, in the memories that went with them. So, it’s not silly. I should know, I lost everything from my childhood and that belonged to my mother and sister.” His mind wandered back to the day he was finally able to leave the hospital when he insisted on going to see what was left of the estate.

Nothing could’ve prepared him for the grief that flooded him upon seeing his home charred and in rubble. He’d already been mourning his mother and sister and seeing that everything else was gone too, was overwhelming.

“Grief is the most difficult thing in the world, but I think sometimes it’s easier when we have something physical to hold on to of theirs. Something

that belonged to them and *mattered* to them. It keeps them alive, so losing those memories, is hard.”

“Thank you, Duncan. I’m glad you see it that way. I’m sorry you lost everything too.”

He managed a small smile, moving to rest his hand over hers. “We can both start over in Oregon. Create a new start for ourselves.”

“I was so scared you weren’t going to make it.” Her voice wavered as she wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “I...I didn’t want to go to Oregon without you.”

“I know, I’m sorry I frightened you.”

Rose sniffed and let out a small laugh. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I won’t.” He paused, shaking his head, “I’m sorry if I was difficult to look after. I have a hard time accepting help from others, especially after how many people had to nurse me back to health after the fire.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“I don’t like to be a burden.”

She drew her eyebrows together and her gaze met his. He was sure he could feel the warmth melting his heart within seconds. “You’re not a burden, Duncan.”

As he looked down into her beautiful eyes, he knew all hope was lost for him. He was helplessly and completely in love with her. And even though he knew there was a slim chance of her ever returning his affections, he had to believe in that small part of him that said, “what if?”

Before he had a chance to think about it, he leaned his head down toward her and he closed his eyes as their lips met. He paused, expecting her to pull away or scream with disgust.

None of those things happened, though. When he dared to pull away and open his eyes, he found her smiling and looking right into his eyes. He almost didn’t believe what had just happened.

“I’m sorry,” he said, feeling color rush to his cheeks.

“Don’t be.” She smiled deeper, her eyes seeming to sparkle.
Perhaps it wasn’t so hopeless after all.

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CHAPTER 23



ROSE

Ever since he'd kissed her, she'd been having trouble concentrating on her jobs. As she scrubbed at the dishes from supper, she found herself looking toward him across the camp, often meeting his gaze.

"Rose? Did you hear anything I just said?"

"*Hmm...* sorry, yes. I mean, no. I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Mrs. Potter let out a merry laugh, giving her a scolding look. "I don't know where your mind is this evening, but I'm sure it's a hundred miles away from here."

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired I think."

"It's alright, dearie. You should get to sleep early tonight then. I was only asking if you'd fetch some water once you're done with the dishes. After what happened with Mr. Clemonte, I'd like to make sure we have lots of safe water to drink."

"Oh, alright. Yes, of course, Mrs. Potter."

The woman smiled softly, her round cheeks rosy. "Thank you, dearie."

Once she'd managed to finish all the dishes, she wiped her hands on her apron and grabbed the bucket from the back of the wagon.

When she turned around, she almost ran straight into Duncan and she let out a gasp, dropping the bucket to the ground with a clatter.

"My goodness, must you sneak up on people like that?"

He chuckled, leaning down to retrieve it. "Sorry. I didn't mean to."

She lifted her gaze and was met with his clear, blue eyes looking down at her softly. Feeling her cheeks redden, she took the bucket from him quickly and forced a nod. "I need to go get some water."

"Alright, be careful."

She managed a small smile, before ducking away from him and hurrying in the direction of the river.

Taking a few long, deep breaths she forced her heart to return to its normal rhythm and by the time she reached the water, she felt much better.

Everything had changed between them now and she didn't know if it would ever get any easier to face him.

The purple-gray of the evening sky reflected in the river, blurry starlight mirrored and seeming to dance within the fast-moving current. Descending the bank carefully, she knelt down and dunked the metal bucket into the water.

Heaving it back up on to the shore, she looked down at it and saw the half-moon reflected on its surface.

"Good evening, Miss Ripley," a smooth voice said behind her, and she jumped to her feet, spilling some of the water.

She'd known who it was the moment she'd heard the way he'd said her name. *Mr. Montgomery.*

"What do you want?"

"To say that I accept your apology for striking me."

She let out a laugh, shaking her head. "Well, you certainly are as foolish as I thought because I didn't apologize and certainly won't."

He exhaled loudly, drawing his dark brows tightly together. "What is it you see in him for you to defend him so? He's a horrible beast and I'm sure he's cast some evil spell on you."

"You're the horrible beast, not him. He's nothing but kind and gentle. Everything *you* are not."

“Is that so?” He drawled out the words and she could hear the venom on his tongue.

She had to get out of here. Deciding to abandon the bucket, she stomped up the bank, trying not to lose her nerve as she took a wide path around him.

“Where are you going?”

“That doesn’t concern you.” She scowled, before feeling a tight grip around her elbow as she was pulled backward.

Stumbling, she managed to catch herself and when she lifted her gaze, she found his cruel eyes staring down at her.

“Let me go!” she shrieked, trying to pull her arm free. Fear rushed through her as she screamed as loud as she could. She thrashed against his grip as his other hand came around her head and covered her mouth, leaving her cries muffled.

She could see the flickering lights of camp in the distance, and she was sure someone would’ve heard her. She just had to fight until they made it to her. Help would come. It had to.

Kicking back at him, she felt her heel connect with his shin and he let out a string of curses, but he didn’t let go of his hold on her.

“It didn’t have to be this way, Miss Ripley. We could’ve been happy together if you’d only given me the chance,” he hissed in her ear as she desperately tried to pull away from him.

Suddenly, he let out a grunt and she caught a blur of movement out of the corner of her eye as his grip loosened and she escaped. She ran a few paces away before looking back over her shoulder to where Mr. Montgomery was being pinned to the ground.

“I told you to leave her alone!” Duncan’s voice shook with anger, and she watched as his fist made contact with Mr. Montgomery’s face.

He got a few punches in before he was pushed to the side and to her horror, Mr. Montgomery was back on his feet.

“She doesn’t want *you*,” he spat at Duncan, kicking him in the sides. “She just feels bad for you.”

She gasped as he kicked him again, looking around for anyone coming to help. In the distance three men were rushing toward them, but she couldn’t wait.

She dashed toward Mr. Montgomery who had his back to her and with all her strength, she shoved him forward, sending him stumbling. It was enough time for Duncan to jump to his feet as the cruel man’s gaze landed on her, seething with anger.

“You stupid girl,” he hissed, lunging toward her, but not before Duncan jumped in front of her and pushed her back.

He swung a fist toward Mr. Montgomery, and she heard the deafening crack as blood began to pour from his nose.

Finally, the other men arrived and two pulled Mr. Montgomery away, restraining his arms behind him as the other held Duncan back.

Her knees were shaking, and she was sure they’d give out at any minute as she felt relief burning through her heart.

She was okay. She was okay. Duncan was okay.

Catching his concerned gaze from where he was still being firmly held by the large man she recognized as Adella’s stepfather, she managed to give him a wobbly smile, so he would know she was alright.

She could see the anger burning in his eyes and she knew with certainty, that Mr. Montgomery would never lay his hands on her again.

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CHAPTER 24



DUNCAN

“Are you sure you're alright?”

She sniffed, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Yes, Duncan. I’m sure. It just scared me is all.”

It broke his heart to see her like this and it also made him even angrier with Mr. Montgomery. As soon as he got Rose back to camp safely, he'd go straight to Mr. Cohen to see what could be done about him.

Her eyes were wide with fear and her hands were shaking terribly. She took a step toward him and before he realized what was happening, her arms wrapped around his neck, and he felt her head rest against his chest.

He froze for a moment, surprised by her warm embrace. Letting out a shaky breath, he suddenly felt much better, despite the stabbing pain in his ribs. He hesitantly rested a hand on her back.

“Thank you, Duncan.”

“I won’t ever let him near you again,” he promised, his gaze landing on Mrs. Potter rushing toward them.

Letting go, he felt her slip out of his arms and she gave him a weak smile before she was pulled into a crushing hug.

“Oh, my goodness, dearie. I should never have sent you for the water. This is all my fault. I heard shouting and then Mr. Montgomery being

dragged through camp, and I just knew. Oh! I just knew he'd done something dreadful. Did he hurt you? Are you hurt anywhere? I—"

"Mrs. Potter! I'm alright, I promise," Rose managed to interrupt, and Duncan met her gaze over Mrs. Potter's shoulder. Her eyes were wide but sparkling with amusement.

The old woman sure did have a knack for worrying. Duncan was just glad this might mean she'd stop fussing over him for awhile.

"Mrs. Potter," he said, clearing his throat. "You're causing Rose's face to turn blue."

"Oh, dearie me!" she exclaimed, quickly letting go, and Rose stumbled back a few steps.

"Miss Ripley!" Horace came tottering up to them, Clarence close behind him.

"I'm alright, everyone. I promise. Duncan came right on time," she explained, and he felt her hand rest gently on his arm.

"My word if they don't keep that man out of my sight, I'll have my hands around his throat so quick, he won't even see it coming," Horace muttered angrily, drawing his bushy gray eyebrows together.

Rose laughed lightly. "But I thought you said violence wasn't the answer?"

"I was incorrect about that. In this situation anyway."

Duncan shook his head in disbelief. He would never have imagined seeing this side of Horace. The man was always so quiet and matter-of-fact about everything. He was sure he'd never seen him so angry before.

Once they were back in camp, he eased himself down by the fire and winced as pain laced through his ribs and into his lungs.

"Duncan?"

He managed a weak smile, not wanting to worry her any more than he already had in the last week. "I'm alright."

"You look pale."

“Thank you.”

She knelt down beside him, and he felt her hand reach for his. “Is it your side?”

“I’m fine.”

“Oh, do stop with that, won’t you? I can see you’re not fine and you likely overdid it, fighting him like that, you know? You’ve only just gotten better so you should’ve—”

“Rose,” he said, squeezing her slender hand. “Nothing...not even the worst day of me being ill, would’ve stopped me from protecting you.”

Her soft gaze met his and he could see the firelight flickering in it as she nodded. “I...I know that. Which is why you need to let me look after you now.”

Heaving a sigh, he decided it was best not to argue with her. Mrs. Potter was beside him now too, lifting his shirt enough to see what damage had been done. She poked and prodded, and he did his best to bite his tongue at the pain. Rose didn’t let go of his hand, though, and whenever he wanted to push Mrs. Potter away, he found her eyes and managed to stay calm.

“I think they’re just bruised, dearie,” she finally said, patting him on the shoulder as he pulled his shirt back down. He could’ve told them as much. He knew what a broken rib felt like. He’d broken many after his fall from the window. That pain had almost been worse than the burns.

This was painful, yes, but nothing compared to that feeling.

“So, he’s okay?”

“Yes, dearie. Nothing a little rest won’t fix and some herb Robert salve. Which you *will* do.” Mrs. Potter firmly wagged a finger at him. “Won’t you, boy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled with satisfaction and stood up, hobbling over to the wagon, no doubt to make up the beds. He knew it would only be a matter of time until he was rushed off to bed.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep anyway, but if it made them feel better, he'd try. Energy still surged through his veins, though, and he found himself struggling to keep his hands still.

"Rose?"

"Yes?"

"I...I have to ask."

"What is it?"

He let out a long breath, his right side stinging miserably.

She doesn't want you. She just feels bad for you. Mr. Montgomery's words stung at him worse than his bruised ribs. *She. Doesn't. Want. You.*

"What Mr. Montgomery said..." he trailed off, not wanting to have to say the words out loud.

She groaned, shaking her head. "He's a horrible, horrible man. He's wrong. What he said, is *not* true."

Hope stirred in his chest, and he forced himself to stomp it down. Hope was a dangerous game. One he wasn't sure he could afford to play. "I...I know I'm not the most handsome man in the world, so I—"

"Don't say that, Duncan. It isn't true. I see such a wonderful man when I look at you. I only hope someday you'll be able to see yourself the same way as I do."

As he looked into her eyes and felt her warm hand fitted tightly in his, he felt the tears stinging the back of his throat. "I love you, Rose. You don't need to respond to that or feel the same way. I just needed you to know that. We still have a long way to go until we get to Oregon, and I would hate to not get the chance to tell you."

To his surprise, a grin spread across her cheeks, and she gave his shoulder a gentle shove. "Oh, you fool! I already told you I loved you first, but you obviously were too feverish to hear me."

He let out a laugh, not caring if anyone saw him as he pulled her into his arms and felt her chin rest on his shoulder. After everything that had

happened, he didn't ever want to let go.

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CHAPTER 25



ROSE

They were off again.

The full day at camp had been a welcome time to rest and prepare for the next part of the journey, but it was nice to be continuing on. Even though she knew they were still on schedule, she couldn't help the fear that crept in when she thought of the tales about people not getting to Oregon before the snowfall.

The thought of being stranded and freezing to death wasn't something she particularly wanted to experience. She'd much rather get there with plenty of time to spare, even if it meant rushing along.

The wagon creaked and clattered beside her, and she could hear the labored panting of the oxen. Daisy trotted along from where she was tied behind the wagon. Every now and then, Rose gave her a scratch behind the ears.

She was the sweetest cow she'd ever known and once she came to realize that Daisy wasn't like the old cow in her uncle's stables that liked to kick, she found she enjoyed the animal's company.

Adella seemed to have grown fond of her too, and she often talked to Daisy like she was a human.

Today, though, her friend had twisted her ankle and had been forced to spend the day riding in her wagon.

She missed her steady companionship and she hoped within a few days, Adella would be able to walk with her again.

“Is Daisy looking after you?”

She smiled, recognizing his voice. “Oh, of course.”

“Good.” He chuckled, reaching a hand out to pat Daisy on the back. The cow looked up at him with wide eyes before turning her head back enough to stretch out her long tongue and give Duncan’s hand a lick. “Oh, no. That was horrible!”

Rose laughed, shaking her head as Duncan quickly pulled his hand away and wiped it on his shirt.

“I think that cow has something wrong with it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Daisy. She’s just friendly.”

“Too friendly, perhaps.” Duncan chuckled. A warm, familiar sound that she was so grateful to hear.

He fell into step beside her, and she rested one hand on her hip. “Didn’t Mrs. Potter say you needed to rest?”

“Who can possibly rest in the back of that awful, dusty, jarring wagon? I feel stiff but the walk's doing me good. Besides, if anyone should be resting, it’s you.”

“Why? I told you, I’m fine.”

“From what Mrs. Potter tells me, you hardly slept or ate while I was sick, and then with the fright you had last night, I’m just worried about you.” His soft gaze warmed her heart and as much as it was annoying, she was glad to see his concern for her.

For so long, she hadn’t had anyone who really cared for her and now she had made so many new friends that she knew would do anything for her. She was so grateful to have found them. In such a short time, they’d all become family to her.

“I’m okay, I promise.”

He gave her a crooked smile and offered his arm to her. Sliding her hand in to nestle between the crook of his elbow, they walked along behind the wagon in silence, and she knew she was safe with him right beside her.



Mr. Montgomery had received a warning from the captain and even though she felt uneasy with him still around, she knew people were aware of what had happened.

Everyone would be keeping a close eye on him from now on. Duncan told her the captain had said if it happened again, Mr. Montgomery would be kicked out of the wagon train and forced to find his way to Oregon on his own.

She sat by the fire with her knees hugged to her chest as she watched the dancing, orange flames swirl and crackle. It was a cool summer evening, and she allowed the warmth from the fire to settle over her.

Mrs. Potter had gone to bed already, while Mr. Flair and Mr. Watson sat silently across from her. They too seemed absorbed in watching the bonfire. Some days left everyone too exhausted to even think of talking, singing or telling stories.

Sometimes it was enough to just be in each other's presence after a long day of walking along the endless trail.

She glanced over her shoulder to where Duncan was sitting a ways back from the fire, the familiar scraping of metal against wood a steady rhythm in the quiet night.

"Aren't you cold?" she said softly, and he lifted his head quickly. She noticed his gaze look toward the fire and then dart back to her face.

"No, I'm alright. Thank you."

She sighed, as he returned to his carving. In the time she'd come to know him, she'd noticed his tendency to stay back from the campfire, and

she knew even if he'd never admit it, the scars from his earlier life weren't just on the outside.

Pushing herself to stand, she reluctantly walked away from the fire's warmth and reached under the wagon where the men's beds had been made up for a blanket.

Resting it over her arm, she came to stand behind Duncan and draped the blanket over his shoulders. She felt him tense at her touch and if he tried to protest, she was ready to scold him.

Instead, his expression softened, and he gave her a small smile. "Thank you, Rose."

"You're welcome. Don't need you getting sick again." She paused, her eyes landing on the carving he still held tightly in his hand. "What are you making?"

"Guess."

"A horse for the children?"

He shook his head, a strand of hair falling over his forehead.

"A fish."

"A fish? Why would I be making a fish?"

She groaned, wishing she hadn't asked. Of course, he wouldn't give her a straight answer. "Why not? What's wrong with a fish?"

"Nothing. Nothing. But no, it's not a fish. I guess you'll have to wait and see."

Rolling her eyes, she turned toward the wagon. "Good night, Duncan."

"Good night, Rose."

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CHAPTER 26



DUNCAN

The June sun shone down on his back relentlessly and sweat clung to his brow. The days were growing warmer, and it made walking more difficult for both them and the animals.

He was sure one day one of the oxen would collapse. He couldn't imagine pulling a heavy wagon on a day like this.

"I sure wish there was some shade somewhere. Even just for a few minutes." Rose sighed beside him, and he turned his gaze to look down at her.

Her nose and chin were burnt bright red, despite the hat she was wearing, and he knew his own face looked the same.

"Perhaps the sun will go behind a cloud soon."

She let out a laugh, shaking her head. "Duncan, where on earth do you see a cloud today? All I can see is blue, blue, and more blue."

"You never know. The weather can change quickly out here."

"I suppose you're right."

"I'm always right." He grinned, squeezing her hand lightly.

Ever since that night around the fire, after he told her that he loved her, things had changed between them, and he was grateful for it. He liked her steady companionship and the easy banter they had. It gave him the strength he needed to keep going.

They'd left the comfort of Fort Kearny two weeks ago now. Since then, they had gone through a great stretch of land with plenty of good grass for the animals and an abundance of clean water and wood.

They'd also seen the famed Courthouse and Chimney rocks, a great natural formation of large rocks. It had been an incredible feeling to stand below them and look up at the sight. It reminded him just how small he was in this great world. They were massive structures of a light-colored rock, with juts and rough points. Against the blue sky, they'd been almost breathtaking.

A few groups had turned back in this time as well, deciding that the journey was over for them. Many had lost members of their family or were out of money and knew they probably wouldn't make it to Oregon.

It always pained him to leave them behind, knowing they'd all started out with the same hopes and dreams for the future. He knew he was fortunate because he'd been able to afford enough supplies to keep the wagon stocked up. Without it he knew it was unlikely he would have survived his illness.

"What do you think Fort Laramie will be like?" she asked, pulling him from his wandering thoughts.

"Much like Fort Kearny, I would think."

"I hope so. I like feeling a bit of civilization once in awhile, especially after being so long in the wilderness. It feels like one can breathe properly again for awhile, knowing there are supplies and assistance if we need it."

He nodded. They were only a few days out from the fort, and he was looking forward to the chance to trade some quality furs he'd hunted.

For now, though, he was in no rush to get there as he simply enjoyed his time with Rose each day. Her dark hair hung in a neat braid over her shoulder and in the midst of this rugged landscape, she stood out with her beauty and grace.

He sometimes couldn't believe he'd been given a chance with someone as wonderful as her. He certainly didn't imagine finding love on the trail, but life had a way of bringing unexpected happenings about. And he was so grateful he'd been in Independence at the very moment she'd been brought on to the stage.

He shuddered to think what might have happened to her, had he not been there. She was a strong and fierce woman, though, and he was sure she would've found her own way somehow, but it still scared him to think of what might have been.

Holding her hand tighter, he promised himself he'd never let go.

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CHAPTER 27



ROSE

“Looks like he’s going to get his father’s money after all.” Mr. Flair’s voice was hushed, and she darted back behind the wagon so he wouldn’t see her.

“I thought it was going to be impossible, but just in time too. But they’re not married yet, so we can’t get our hopes up for him,” Mr. Watson replied.

“She’s such a sweet girl. I knew from the moment she joined us that she would be the one to win his heart. You’ve seen how much his temperament has changed in such a short time. It’s almost as if the old Mr. Clemonte is returning to us.”

“Well, the time is running out for him. He would need to be married by September. That’s less than three months away.”

Ashamed to have listened in on their conversation, she backed away until she could no longer hear them. What had they been talking about, though? What did Duncan getting his father’s money have to do with her?

Her stomach felt unsettled, and she forced herself to sit down in the cold grass that was damp with morning dew.

She wished she hadn’t heard anything at all. It had been so much better to not know. Now doubts swirled in her mind like a treacherous raincloud and she felt panic creeping into her innermost thoughts.

Was that the real reason Duncan had bought her at the auction that day? Had it merely been a last attempt to find a girl to marry him? Was he only nice to her because he knew she was his chance for money?

What would happen if she did marry him? Would he dispose of her afterward?

No. No. No. Pressing her hands against her ears as if doing so would stop the horrible thoughts threatening to suffocate her, she inhaled an unsteady breath.

She needed to talk to Duncan. There was no point worrying about it until she'd given him a chance to explain. She knew him. She'd seen the way he'd knocked Mr. Montgomery to the ground with so much anger, that his feelings must be real.

They had to be.

Gnawing on her bottom lip, she pushed herself up off the ground and forced herself to head in the direction she'd seen Duncan going earlier with his rifle strapped to his back. One step after another, each one filling her with dread for what she might learn.

A few moments had been enough to shatter her blissful heart and she only hoped that it was all a misunderstanding, so she could go back to the happiness she'd been enjoying. She wasn't sure she would have the strength to continue on to Oregon if Duncan turned out to not be the man she thought he was.



She found him just outside of camp, heading toward her. When his gaze landed on her, a smile lit up her face and for a split second, warmth filled her heart.

Then Mr. Flair and Mr. Watson's words came rushing back to her and she quickly dropped her head to look at her feet.

She heard him stand in front of her and his hand came to rest on her elbow.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Forcing herself to lift her gaze, she frowned and shook her head. “No, I...*uhh*...needed to talk to you. If you have time.”

“Of course, Rose. What’s wrong?”

She looked around to see if anyone was nearby and when she was satisfied they were alone, she let out a long breath. “I think I overheard something I shouldn’t have.”

“What do you mean?” He reached for her other hand now, and she flinched, pulling away from him.

She needed a bit of distance to sort through all the complicated thoughts and emotions spinning around inside her, and his touch made it difficult to focus.

“Rose?”

“Sorry, I...I heard Mr. Flair and Mr. Watson saying something about you finally getting money from your father. That you needed to get married by September, and I just...I’m not sure what to think.”

His face fell and he shook his head quickly. “I wasn’t hiding it from you, I promise. I’ve honestly been so caught up in everything lately that I completely forgot about it, but I would’ve told you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Be...because maybe you don’t really love me, and you just want the money. Then once you have it, I’ll be trapped or...or you’ll sell me to the next—”

“No!” he spoke quickly, and before she had time to react, he was reaching for her, his arms wrapping around her. “Rose, I would never. I wouldn’t. That’s not who I am.”

She allowed herself to lean into him, grateful for his steady hands around her to keep her from falling over. Tears escaped and ran down her cheek as she rested her trembling hand on his chest.

“Do you believe me, Rose? You have to believe me. Please.” His voice shook as he pulled away enough for her to look up into his eyes.

His eyebrows were drawn tightly together and when she saw the fear in his usually calm blue gaze, she knew he was telling the truth. She managed a nod, quickly reaching to wipe at her eyes, rather ashamed that she’d panicked so quickly.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have doubted you, but I...I don’t know.”

“No, I understand. What your uncle did to you was horrible and I can imagine it probably scared you to think I’d do the same, but I truly love you, Rose. I mean it.”

“I know that now. Thank you, Duncan.”

His fingers came up to brush against her cheek and he gave her a half-smile. “Those two shouldn’t have been gossiping like that anyway. I’m sorry you had to find out like that.”

“So...so you have to get married to get your father’s money?” she managed to ask.

“Yes, I’d all but given up on it. That’s why I decided to head out to Oregon. I sold as much of the household items and fled before the lawyer had a chance to come in and sell the house right from under me. Most of my father’s money lies in the bank, but as soon as I turn twenty-five, it’s to be given to an orphanage. Unless I get married.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I’ve asked myself that many times. I’ve often thought it a last cruel joke to play on me. He knew it would be difficult to find someone who would be willing to marry an ugly man like—”

“Stop,” she scolded. She hated it when he talked about himself like that. “You’re not ugly. You’re the most handsome man I’ve ever met. Inside and

out.”

“Thank you, Rose.” His unscarred cheek flushed red as he paused. “I fell in love with you for who you are and for all you’ve taught me. I don’t care if I even get the money. I really don’t. As long as I’m with you, I’ll be happy.”

She sniffed and let out a relieved laugh as the warning calls began to shout through camp to pack up and get ready.

His hand slipped into hers as they hurried back to their wagon to help the rest of their group get everything ready to leave. As they went their separate ways, she felt lighter on her feet and knew that today was going to be a lovely day.

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CHAPTER 28



DUNCAN

They arrived in Fort Laramie late that evening when the sun had long ago disappeared behind the horizon and the dusky purple sky hung over them. As they'd neared the fort, the faint glimmer of light coming from it had been a welcome sight after a long couple of weeks with no sign of human life.

Tomorrow morning they'd go into the fort to stock up on anything they needed, and Duncan had his furs all neatly folded at the back of the wagon, ready to trade with.

They were in need of more bullets as well as flour, but if there was anything left over, he wanted to also get some more pork as they were running low, and it had served them well for most meals.

The moon was almost full in the cloudless night sky, and it lit up camp with its faint, white glow. Rose was sitting by the campfire, listening to Clarence's painful singing and he watched her give him a polite smile.

Kneeling down beside her, he took a deep breath and braved himself to ask, "Rose, do you want to take a walk to the river? You should see how incredible the moonlight looks on it."

"Oh yes, I'd like that very much." She smiled and he offered her a hand to help her to her feet.

He didn't let go of her hand and she didn't seem to mind, as she walked closely beside him away from camp.

Clarence's voice slowly faded away, much to his relief and was replaced by the chirping of crickets and whinnying horses.

"I love nights like this. When the air is still, and the stars seem to stretch on forever."

He nodded, smiling down at her. Her face was lifted toward the sky as her eyes seemed to be trying to soak in every single star.

"Yes, it's beautiful out here, but I think once we get to Oregon, it's going to be even better."

"I know. I can hardly wait to see the mountains." She breathed, closing her eyes. For a moment it looked like she had gone on ahead of him and arrived in Oregon.

When they reached the bubbling river, they sat down on the bank and for a few minutes peaceful silence settled between them. He felt her hand wrapped around his arm and her head rested against his shoulder.

It was hard to focus on anything other than his racing heart and he knew he needed to do it soon before he lost his courage.

Reaching under his jacket for the carving he'd made for her, he cleared his throat. "I...uhh...made this for you."

She lifted her head and turned her face to look up at him as he offered her the wooden rose. He'd started working on it late at night after she'd gone to the wagon once it was obvious what it was going to be. As she took it in her hands and looked down at it, he realized what a sad gift it was. He wished he could've gotten her some jewellery or something—

"Oh Duncan, it's beautiful!" she cried, a bright smile lighting up her face.

"I know it's not much, but I wanted to—"

"It's the best thing anyone's ever given me. I can't believe you made this. It looks exactly like a rose, with the thorns and everything."

Before he had a chance to reply, he felt her arms wrap around his neck, causing him to almost fall over. Letting out a laugh, he rested his hand on her back and felt her warm tears against his neck.

“Thank you, Duncan. I love it.”

“You’re welcome.” He let go as she pulled away and looked down at the rose. She ran her finger along the stem, tears glistening in her eyes. “I love you,” he said softly.

“I love you too.” She sniffed.

He could hear his heart pounding in his ears as he reached for her hand. “Rose, will you marry me?”

Her eyes widened as she dropped the rose into her lap and pressed her hand to her mouth. “Oh, Duncan, of course. Yes, of course I’ll marry you!”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I...I can’t wait to start my life with you.”

He smiled, leaning toward her and cupped her cheek in his hand. “Me too.”

Closing his eyes as his lips brushed against hers, it felt like all the pain of his past had been lifted from his heart and he finally felt *alive* again.

This was real. It wasn’t simply part of his feverish dreams. She loved him. For what reason, he was sure he’d never understand, but he was eternally grateful for her.

His beautiful Rose.

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CHAPTER 29



ROSE

“I can’t believe you’re getting married!” Adella exclaimed, tugging on her arm.

They’d camped at Fort Laramie for two nights and they’d already been traveling for a few hours. In that time, her friend had made that same exclamation at least ten times.

“I can’t either.”

“How’d he ask you again? Tell it from the very start!”

“I’ve already told you the story. It’s not going to change from the first time you heard it.”

“Oh, Rose, please! It’s just so romantic. I’ve been confined to that wagon for so long and feel as though I’ve missed everything.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. Her friend seemed to be more enthusiastic about the whole thing than she was. They’d decided to get married tonight, once they stopped for the day.

Duncan had already talked to a pastor who was traveling with them, and he’d agreed to perform a small ceremony for them.

At first, Duncan had suggested waiting until they got to Oregon so she might have a proper wedding dress and breakfast, but she’d insisted she didn’t care about any of those things. And she didn’t.

As long as she was with him, she would be happy. All the people who were like family to her were here with them on the trail and she was quite content with a simple wedding with only those she truly cared about there.

She wanted Duncan to receive the money from his father too, even if he'd told her repeatedly that she didn't need to worry about getting married before then. He said he didn't care about the money one bit, but she'd reasoned with him until he'd relented.

Having enough money to build a home and settle in Oregon would be a great blessing and they'd be foolish not to take it.

Plus, she saw the side of his father's decision to withhold the money in a brighter light. Duncan was angry with him for it. Had called it a cruel joke to play on him.

Rose however could see the love his father had for him at the time of his passing. He'd believed in Duncan's heart from the very beginning and had wanted him to believe in himself.

To realize that he was no less of a man because of the scars he carried with him. She hoped someday he would come to realize this too and accept himself for who he was, scars and all. Because that was the man she'd fallen in love with.

She knew it would likely take time since the scars on his heart were the ones that hurt him the most, even if he would never admit to it. But she promised to be there with him through it all and hoped that one day he would be able to see how much she truly loved him.

"Can I see the rose again? Please?" Adella grinned, almost bouncing up and down with excitement.

She smiled, grateful for her dear friend. She was sure she wouldn't have survived the nerves fluttering around like butterflies in her stomach today if it weren't for Adella's distractions.

Reaching for where she'd safely tucked it at the bottom of the basket hanging on her arm, she felt the smooth wooden carving against her fingers.

Before passing it to Adella, she stopped to look down at it again.

It was just as beautiful as it had been when he'd given it to her. It was made of a darker wood, with a few light swirls through it. The leaves had been grooved carefully to look so realistic and the petals curved around one another neatly.

"This is even better than a man picking flowers for you." Adella breathed, carefully turning the rose over in her hands, "Because you know he spent so much time on it. And all of that time he spent thinking of you."

Rose smiled, taking the carving back and setting it carefully into the bottom of the basket so it wouldn't fall out. "I know. I wouldn't have expected Duncan to be such a romantic. When I first met him, he was a true grump. I thought I'd never see him without a scowl."

"Love has the power to change people." Adella squeezed her arm, her sky-blue eyes meeting hers.

It was certainly true. Love *did* have the power to change people. She'd seen it for herself because it had changed her too.

After so many years of being deemed worthless by her uncle, she'd come to believe it was true, but Duncan had shown her true love. Something she hadn't believed would be out there for her.

She'd destined herself to a life of servitude, with no real home of her own until that dreadful day in April when she'd first seen the man who'd bought her. If she could only go back to tell that frightened version of herself that everything would turn out alright. That she needn't be afraid of the man standing before her.

It was rather surprising how quickly life changed. One minute she'd felt all hope had been lost, and the next she'd been embarking on a journey to Oregon with a group of strangers.

Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if she'd listened to the fear in her heart and had decided to stay in Independence to find work. It was impossible to imagine a life without the family she'd found

here. And the scary thing was, she wouldn't have ever known there could've been anything different.

She hated to think where she might've ended up. Who she might've become.

But now her future was bright and stood before her like a beautiful sunrise. Her life was only just beginning.

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CHAPTER 30



DUNCAN

On that night he'd asked Rose to marry him, he hadn't imagined there would be a day he'd feel more afraid than he had at that time. Now, though, his heart was pounding in his chest, and he thought he was going to be sick.

Clarence stood beside him, and he felt his friend's hand pat him on the back gently. He managed to give him a weak smile in return.

Pastor Daniels stood on his other side, a worn leather Bible held in one arm and his bald head shining with the reflection of the setting sun.

They'd found a nice spot outside of camp with a view of the sloping meadows and large hills in the distance. Cicadas hummed merrily and the wind swept through the wild grasses with a soft hiss.

As soon as he saw her walking toward him, he was sure his heart stopped. She was wearing her same yellow dress that trailed behind her, and in her hands, she had a small bouquet of wildflowers. He wasn't sure where she'd found them, but the white and blue petals looked as though they'd been grown with her in mind.

Her long hair hung in loose waves over her shoulders and a few flowers had been woven into it too.

Mrs. Potter and Rose's close friend, Miss Lawson had helped her get ready and he let out a small laugh as he saw Rose swat Mrs. Potter's fussing hand away.

Soon she stood in front of him, and her bright eyes looked up at him as a soft smile settled on her face. She passed the bouquet to Miss Lawson, who stood up on her toes to plant a kiss on Rose's cheek.

Duncan watched as Rose gave her friend a grateful nod, before turning her attention back to him.

"You look beautiful." he whispered, reaching for her hands.

"Thank you," she said as her cheeks turned a faint shade of pink.

The pastor began, "We're here today to celebrate the union of Mr. Duncan Clemonte and Miss Rose Ripley. Their marriage today stands out as an example that God's great blessing is always with us. Even throughout the difficult trials we've no doubt faced in the past couple of months. In the uncertainty and trials, God has brought these two together and it truly is, a remarkable example that He is with us always." His voice was steady as he spoke to the small group that had gathered to watch.

Duncan squeezed her hands gently as her teary eyes stared up at him. As the short ceremony came to an end, he found he was no longer listening to Pastor Daniels. His entire attention was on the incredible woman who was about to be his wife as he imagined their future together.

"I now pronounce you, man and wife."

Cheers and claps from their friends rung out around them, as he pulled Rose into his arms and kissed her, painfully aware of all the eyes watching them.

When he pulled away, he found her smiling face and no longer felt afraid. She was his wife, and he was her husband.

He couldn't believe this was really happening.

As their friends came to surround them and he was pulled into Mrs. Potter's crushing embrace, he laughed and cried along with everyone else.



“I got you a wedding gift.”

“You didn’t need to get me anything, Duncan!” She sighed, shaking her head.

They were finally alone now, as everyone else had retired for the night. It was just the two of them around the fire and he realized he’d been sitting here without feeling uneasy the whole evening.

For so long, he’d avoided going near any fire because just the sight of it was enough to send him back to that awful night.

He was sure it was just because his other feelings were so much stronger right at the moment, that he’d been able to push it away for now.

He stood up and lifted the lid on a crate he’d set under the wagon that evening with the gift tucked safely inside.

He’d wrapped it in one of his shirts so it wouldn’t get damaged, and excitement rushed through him as he returned to the fire and sat down beside her.

Setting it in her lap, she looked up at him and smiled. Tapping his fingers nervously against his knee as she unwrapped it, he searched her face for her reaction.

Instantly, she gasped and hugged the worn book to her chest, tears already forming in her eyes.

“Duncan,” she cried, holding it out in front of her now as she brushed her hand over the hard cover.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course, I like it. I love it! Wherever did you find something like this?”

He smiled as he moved to wrap an arm around her shoulder and felt her head lean back against his chest. “In Fort Laramie. A man came up to me, asking if I had any bullets he could trade for. He said he had a book that used to belong to his wife and so we traded. She died about a month ago after falling ill, and that had been the only book she’d brought with her.”

“I can’t believe he was willing to part with it.”

He shrugged, glancing down at where she was gently flipping through the pages. “He had four children who were hungry. He needed the bullets.”

“Well, I love it. It’ll serve as a reminder of those we’ve lost along the way and preserving their memory. I can’t wait to read it. *Sense and Sensibility*. I haven’t heard of it.”

“The man sounded like he had some sort of accent. I think maybe he was from England. Perhaps it’s popular there.”

“There’s no author name. All it says here is ‘*By A Lady*’.”

“She must have wanted to remain unknown.”

“I think I’d like to write a book someday. I don’t know what I’d even begin to write about, but just imagine telling a story and having thousands of people read your heart and soul. Can you imagine how incredible that would feel?”

He chuckled, resting his cheek on the top of her head. “I don’t know that I’d enjoy having people read my heart and soul, but yours would be one people would like to read. When we get to Oregon, I’m going to build you a library and I’ll put a nice writing desk in there for you.”

“I’d like that very much.” She closed the book and settled it in her lap.

“And now you have the first novel for your collection.”

“I’ll cherish it forever.”

Settling his gaze on the rise and fall of the bright flames, he took in a deep breath and focused on the warmth in his heart. Everything that had led him to this moment finally felt like it had happened for a reason.

If that fire hadn’t happened, he would never have decided to start over in Oregon and therefore, he never would’ve met Rose.

Even though it was painful to remember all he’d lost, it felt nice to finally feel like he was moving on toward someplace happier. He didn’t know exactly what Oregon would hold for them, but he had faith that as long as she was by his side, everything would turn out just fine.

EPILOGUE



ROSE

Her feet ached with each step as she held tightly to her husband's arm. It still felt strange to refer to him as that, but every time she heard the word, it sent a thrill straight to her heart.

They'd been married for five days now, and life felt so blissful. She couldn't imagine taking on the trials that still remained ahead of them with anyone else but him.

The sky above was a dark gray and it looked like it wanted to rain. She was grateful for a bit of a break from the unrelenting sun.

Up ahead was a large rock formation made of a sandy colored stone and she knew without a doubt this was Register Rock.

She'd heard the captain talking about it a few days ago and couldn't believe how tall it was.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said softly, looking up at Duncan.

He was staring at the great structure too, his blue eyes wide. "Me neither. It's incredible."

The wagon in front of them slowed to a stop and she turned to look up at the rock in complete awe.

She had to lift her chin right up to the sky to see the top of it. Before leaving Missouri, she had never imagined things like this existed. It made

her heart flutter with excitement getting to take in all these new sights and wonders.

She watched as Captain Cohen climbed up the rock a ways, before turning to face them.

“We’re going to stop here for awhile. Many travelers before us have carved names and messages into this rock, so if you’d like to leave your mark here, I encourage you to do so. Future Oregon trail travelers will see all your names and find courage knowing others have passed here as well,” he shouted as a few people cheered and applauded.

“Shall we?” Duncan smiled, pulling his pocketknife out of his pocket.

Nodding, she took his hand and followed him toward the rock. Once she stood right in front of it, she reached out to touch the cool stone and marvelled at the expanse of names before her.

Tears flooded her eyes as she tried to picture faces for all their names. So many people just like them had been through here. Some wouldn’t have reached Oregon and as she imagined them writing their names here with the same excitement she felt, her heart broke for all those who hadn’t made it. For those who had been forced to keep going despite losing their friends and loved ones.

The journey to Oregon was no easy one, but for those who’d arrived there, she hoped they’d found exactly what they’d been dreaming of.

They found an unmarked spot and she rested her hand on Duncan’s back as he began to carve at the stone. It was slow work but soon a large "D" was visible. He wrote the word "and," before offering her the knife.

“I don’t know if I can do it.” She frowned.

“Sure you can. I’ll help you.” His reassuring grin was enough to encourage her to lift the blade and begin to carve a faint "R" into the surface. By the time she finished, her hand ached from holding the knife so tightly and she gave it back to Duncan so he could finish the rest.

As he worked, she walked a few paces away to read some more names.

A.R. Flint

Anna.

S. Reynolds.

All brave men and women who'd taken on a difficult journey. She wondered what all their stories were.

"Rose!" Duncan called, pulling her from her thoughts as she rushed back over to him.

She felt his arm wrap around her waist and pull her close as they looked up at their names now etched forever into the stone.

D AND R CLEMENTE

A warm tear ran across the bridge of her nose as she sniffed and leaned in closer to Duncan. She felt him plant a kiss atop her head before he let out a laugh.

"We'll never be forgotten now. Maybe someday our great-grandchildren will come to find our names."

Hope soared through her veins at the thought. Even though she knew they were only halfway there and would likely face many challenges still, she was sure they'd make it to Oregon.

And she couldn't wait to build a life for herself there with her husband and all the new friends she'd made along the way.

Once she was settled, she'd think back to this moment and remember all the names of those who'd gone before and imagine the names of the ones to come after.

The dream of a new life was ahead of them, glimmering like a bright star.

Lifting her head to look up at Duncan, she smiled as his lips pressed against hers and time seemed to stop.

There was just him and her and their names shining down on them as a reminder that they'd made it here together.



Thank you for reading Rose! I hope you enjoyed! Keep an eye out for the next book in the series by signing up for [my newsletter](#) and joining [my Facebook group](#)

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Morgan Dawson is a sweet historical romance author who wrote her first book, *The Wagon*, when she was just thirteen.

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***Morgan also has a reader group on Facebook where she interacts with fans and sometimes shares special deals just for members!*

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